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KEVIN MISSAL

SINBAD AND THE RISE OF IBLIS

PENGUIN BOOKS

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PENGUIN BOOKS
SINBAD AND THE RISE OF IBLIS

Kevin Missal started his writing career at the young age of fourteen with his debut novel, *Damien Black: The Battle of Lost Ages*. His literary works have topped the bestselling charts on *Hindustan Times* bestseller and *The Asian Age* bestsellers. He has written fifteen best-selling novels which include the *Narasimha* Trilogy, *Kalki* Trilogy, *Raavanputr Meghnad*, *Yama*, *Karna: The King of Anga*, *Sinbad* series, *Devi* Series, and many more. Some of his books have also been turned into audiobooks.

Kevin has worked with top publishers in India including Fingerprint Publishing, HarperCollins India, Simon and Schuster India, and Penguin Random House India. Translated into six languages, his books have gained wide recognition and popularity.

A graduate from St Stephen's College with a BA Honours in History, Kevin is passionate about Indian mythology, history, and philosophy. He is dedicated to paving his way ahead with many more books to write in the future. Not only is he a prolific writer, but he is also a TEDx speaker and CEO of Hubhawks, a flourishing startup that aims to support budding authors by filling the gaps that exist in book marketing.

Kevin has been featured in several reputed publications including *Times of India*, *The Hindu*, *Telegraph India*, *The Hindustan Times*, *Mid Day*, and *The Indian Saga*.

You can follow him on Instagram (@kevin_9695), LinkedIn and Facebook.

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Dedicated to my readers

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ONE

The world was ending. Or so he thought.

Be patient. Breathe. He reminded himself.

That's what usually happens when you raise the devil from hell. The world ends.

Be patient. Breathe.

Sinbad struggled to take in air and felt weak as if a heavy weight was bearing down on him. His pupils were dilated, and he could hear blood coursing through his veins. It was like a raging river cutting through a narrow ravine in the mountains of the north. The sound was deafening, and it terrified him.

Lying on the ground, Sinbad was unable to move. His head was spinning, and his vision was blurred. He could hear his crew shouting and yelling in a frenzy of madness. They had lost, and he couldn't accept it. He had lost. It had all happened so quickly. Iblis, the mighty devil, had been raised . . . everything was falling apart.

Sinbad swallowed a lump and stared at the ground for what seemed like ages. Then, the blurriness in his sight cleared, and he saw someone approaching him.

'SINBAD! SINBAD!'

Lost in trauma, Sinbad couldn't make out who it was. The person almost resembled Safeena, the love of his life. 'Sinbad! Sinbad! Are you okay?'

Just then, a strong slap surged through the air and hit his cheeks, ringing in his ears. His skin vibrated, and his muscles contracted as he came back to the chaotic present.

He looked around and saw that it was Pressa. The same Chinese

crewmate who liked to bully, push, shove and throw loud words at you when she thought you'd gone 'soft'.

'Look at me! Snap out of it, Sinbad!' she screamed. 'YOU MAD BOY!'

Sinbad blinked hard, looked at her; he nodded, trying to regain his composure. He remembered the moments before he had landed here: they had entered the tomb of Alexander. The devil had risen. Iblis had taken his daughter, Safeena with him.

Safeena, the love of Sinbad's life, had lost all memory due to the deal he had made with the god Anansi. It was a simple pact: the African god would help Sinbad find the legendary crypt of the emperor, in turn, Safeena, the devil's daughter, would forget her lover. And if he wanted her to regain her memory, Sinbad would need to release the sociopathic god from the glass jar where he'd been held captive.

But I can't . . . Anansi is the god of chaos . . . of spiders and trickery. Sinbad thought, feeling defeated.

Safeena, the beautiful, innocent daughter of Iblis, born from his limb, was the girl with cat eyes. She was a good soul, nothing like her father. She wanted the best for the world and sought to save it rather than destroy it. One by one, all the memories of the incidents came rushing back, including the realization that Fatima, his supposed mother, the red-haired horror, and the devil's right-hand, was still alive. After all, he had thought his parents were dead.

But why has she joined Iblis?

Nothing made sense to him. He couldn't believe that two of the most precious people in the world, the ones who should have been with him, were on Iblis's side. And here he was, in the midst of chaos.

'Why did Safeena leave us like this? What happened to her? Something doesn't sit right,' Markus seemed to be asking the group loudly. Sinbad bit his quivering lip.

It was Markus, the tall, muscular man with a scar running down the left side of his face, who had trusted Sinbad and allowed him to use Anansi's realm to get the location of the tomb. Sinbad knew he had to come clean and confess that he had made a foolish deal with Anansi, despite Markus warning him not to fall for the spider's

tricks. Sinbad had thought he was clever enough not to be tricked, but he was wrong. Now, he had lost everything— his love, his parents, and his world had crumbled. As he looked at his crew, he saw them looking around, scared, jumping, and hollering.

'All right, shut up everyone!' It was Idris, his second-in-command. The purple, frizzy-haired seid had rebelled against her own people because she'd fallen in love with a vampire—a mortal enemy of monster hunters. Idris had become part of Sinbad's crew reluctantly, but now she was more than just a crewmate. She was a friend.

'I've had enough,' she exclaimed 'We really need to calm down. Look around you. Nothing has happened. We are still here. Breathing. Alive.' The crew and the soldiers of By Fate and Fortune stopped in their tracks. They looked at each other. Idris stood solemnly, waiting for someone else to start hollering again, but no one did.

'Great. Thank you, everyone. The sun is still bright, the clouds look fine, and we're all alive. Let's figure out how to get out of this one, shall we?' Idris spoke slowly, in a level tone, as she looked at Sinbad for answers, earnestly.

Sinbad licked his lips, and his long, flowing robe swayed as he shifted his weight, but no words came out. Markus asked again, this time in a quiet voice, 'What happened with Safeena? Did she backstab us?'

After a pause, Sinbad finally spoke. 'No . . . she didn't.'

Husayn, Sinbad's best friend, was pacing back and forth, his curly hair tousled from his restless movements.

'Then what?' he asked, his voice rising with each word. 'What happened to her? Why did she just leave with him?' His dark eyes were wide with fear, and he was struggling to catch his breath, as if on the brink of a panic attack.

Sinbad mustered the courage to answer. *Here we go . . .*

But before he could speak, Ashrafiyah, the vampire–witch, appeared in front of him. Even in this pandemonium, she still looked stunning with her raven black hair and tough embroidered overcoat, dark like her eyes, but unlike her olive-coloured pale skin.

'She must have had her reasons, I'm sure. Let's not crucify her

before hearing her side of the story. For now, the question you all are focusing on, that's not the one that is important.'

'Then what is?' Pressa asked.

'Another one.' Ashrafiyah said. Idris understood. 'Yes.'

However, Husayn, Pressa and Markus looked confused.

'What are you all talking about?'

Ashrafiyah began, 'The question you should be asking, sweetheart, is—why did the devil, who just emerged to destroy the world, leave us alive? Us! The very ones intent on stopping him and ending his mere existence.'

'And also . . . ' Idris began, 'why hasn't the world ended till now? Wasn't the world supposed to end the moment he rises to power?'

Sinbad looked around, surveying the scene, and nodded. These questions had saved him now, but he knew he had to answer the Safeena question one day. For now, he had been spared.

'Y-y-yes,' he coughed, mustering the energy to speak again, though his mouth was still dry. 'It's true. Why did he let us live?' He panted. 'Why hasn't the world ended? We have to find out . . . And most importantly, how do we stop him now?'

'Well, my love, thanks for the repetition, but asking the same questions isn't going to answer them.' Ashrafiyah said, rolling her eyes.

'I know. I know. But I was looking at someone who *does* know.' Sinbad signalled over at Pressa, who had been quiet after shaking him awake. 'My favourite seer . . . I believe it's time for you to *see* the answers for us.'

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TWO

Sinbad knew that the situation could go either way—good or bad. Binary.

The common halls of the ship, where food was usually served, had been cleared out. The benches were shoved into the corner, and the tables were pushed against the walls. This was it. All the main members of the crew were present. Sinbad stood in the corner as Idris and Ashrafiyah escorted Pressa to the centre of the room.

'Oh, I'm scared.' Pressa said. 'I . . . am . . . scared.' Pressa, with her long black hair and piercing green eyes, looked visibly shaken as she spoke.

'You have done this multiple times. So why are you scared now?' asked Idris, as she strapped Pressa on to the chair with a rope.

'The very reason why you are doing *this* to me. Binding me to a chair.' Pressa cursed. 'We never did this earlier, so why bother with this lovely practice now?'

'You are dealing with a future where Iblis is alive, my dear.' Ashrafiyah said. 'You are going to see what defeats him, what stops him . . . if there's anything. Iblis is a powerful deity, so to speak, he wouldn't let you *see* it properly. He could probably even stop you or even fight you, so you have to be careful. You have to be all right.'

'What?' she shouted, scared. 'He will *know* I'll be seeing?' She tried to free her arms from the chair, but she was tightly bound to it. 'I don't want to do this anymore . . . Tell me, how would he know?'

Ashrafiyah sighed and shared a careful glance with Idris. 'Um, well, it's a theory.'

‘What’s a theory?’

‘That he’s omnipresent. In seers, in reality, and basically *everywhere*.’ Idris added, sounding nervous.

Sinbad felt a shiver at that statement. Though he realized what Pressa was going through at this moment, he tried to soothe her. ‘I’m sure it’ll be fine.’

Pressa shot him a look. ‘Shut up, fool. He could be here with us. He could be here *now*,’ she said, her heart leaping out and her voice cracking. ‘I am not ready to deal with the devil right now. Please. I haven’t even thought about my career! I’m way too young for this.’

Just then, Husayn scowled under his breath. ‘Him being here . . . that is undeniably creepy.’

‘Very much so,’ Sinbad nodded. ‘Pressa, you’ll be fine. Just do your magic,’ he said, coming forward and reassuring her with a pat on her shoulder.

‘But what if he’s here? For real?’ Pressa asked, worried out of her wits.

Sinbad looked at everyone—they were waiting for him to answer. ‘Let him *watch* us stop him then.’

Pressa looked at him, finding strength in his words. With a triumphant stare she said, ‘Thank you.’

Sinbad smiled.

‘For making it so corny, that is. I feel better. Move back, y’all!’

Sinbad was taken aback, but he was glad that she was back to her feisty self.

As Pressa began to close her eyes, everyone else pushed back into the corners in anticipation.

And for a while nothing happened. Then there was a resounding silence that permeated through the room, only interrupted by the sound of the ship going through turbulence. After that everything changed. The lights began to flicker. The flames on the candlesticks turned blue and a storm raged outside.

‘Iblis is not letting her see!’ Idris yelled. ‘I have read about this in the books. He hates seers.’

‘What happens if he stops her?’ Sinbad asked.

‘Um . . . Um . . . the chapter only mentions this much, so we don’t know the fate of the seers.’ the fellow seid replied with a glumly.

Sinbad swallowed a lump. *Great. I just pushed my friend to her death.*

'I'm sure nothing will happen.' said Idris, trying to comfort herself and just then the chair on which Pressa was sitting began to suspend in the air. It began to rise up. Her eyes shot open and turned blue. Her mouth opened, drool trickling from it. Her hands began to contort, but the ropes stopped her. She started speaking gibberish, and her mouth was moved in many directions, her eyes became bluer. Then she stopped moving, still suspended in the air. Pressa looked at everyone with a confused glare before the chair fell with full force, breaking with her sprawled on top of it. The candle flames returned to normal, and the winds outside the ship quieted down. For a moment, everything was fine. Sinbad rushed towards his friend, grabbing hold of her in his arms and looking straight into her eyes.

'Are you okay?' he asked.

Pressa blinked and Sinbad heaved a sigh of relief.

Thank the gods, she is alive.

Sinbad breathed a sigh of relief.

Pressa coughed and gave a weak smile as her pale skin began to glower in the darkness of the room.

'I feel like having a lot of creamy buttery toast first . . .' she said. 'But I have some news.' She coughed again. 'I couldn't see properly. There was a force that was pushing my vision back. Something was stopping my powers and I don't know what it was, but it was something horribly dark and desolate. Like a cold feeling, just touching the nape of my neck. Cold, so cold . . .' she shivered, her lips drying even further, 'But I did manage to find answers in fragments . . . if that's of any help.'

Sinbad and the others nodded eagerly. 'Time is of essence, I believe.'

'Objects. Artefacts.' she said, under her breath. 'That's what makes Iblis tick.'

'What objects?'

'Objects of power and magnitude.' Pressa said, trying to come on to her feet now as she was given another chair to sit on. 'Of history and of myths. One is the Lamp of Set, the other is the Sword of

Beowulf and the last one . . . the last one is the Poison of Asag. That's what I saw. These are the ones that will destroy him in the future.'

'Okay. So how do we use them?' Husayn asked.

Pressa shook her head. 'No idea. I couldn't see that. I just know that we need to get these objects, which will somehow help us.'

Idris sighed. 'Can't believe that's true.'

'Why?' Pressa was confused.

'Because what you just said, these objects—they don't exist in the first place, in *this* world, at least.'

'That's the point. Whatever I saw, and wherever I saw it, I realized it wasn't from this world, but somewhere else. Somewhere which looked like our world but wasn't. If that makes sense,' replied Pressa, sounding confused.

'Hmm,' hummed Ashrafiyah. 'I've heard about this in witchcraft, actually. About this vampire lord who loved to jump around the different realms to escape the fate of his actions. Each realm is quite similar to ours. It even has us, but in different forms.' Ashrafiyah said. 'Anyway, he was a Count, I believe, and had a thing for black capes.'

'Jumping realms? Geez, what are you talking about?' asked Husayn. 'You mean there are worlds other than our own? This one?'

Ashrafiyah nodded. 'Of course, darling. We are not that special. So, in all probability these objects belong there. But these are . . . ,' she paused ' . . . stories and myths. Realm jumping has never really *existed* so to speak.'

'By that measure, even the end of the world was just in the books until it happened. Like right now,' said Idris. 'Whatever it is, we should definitely look into it.'

'And we don't have time,' Markus added in his husky tone.

A collective murmur took over as Sinbad turned to Pressa. Her eyes held something else, something that haunted her.

'What else did you see?' Sinbad asked. 'Be honest.'

Pressa licked her lips as silence permeated the room, and everyone's gaze bore into her. 'Sinbad, I saw you,' she whispered. 'I saw you dying.'

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THREE

‘Doesn’t make sense.’

Sinbad muttered as he tossed one of the many books from the shelf, continuing his search for information about the objects Pressa had mentioned.

He went through countless pages in the library he had constructed in one of the ship’s lodges. The large room was now filled with collections from across the world, including books including books that were his, that belonged to Idris as well as others in the crew.

He had started his search with the Sword of Beowulf, but had come to a dead end, just like with the rest of the objects.

Sinbad had grown more confident and had started to live up to his title as captain. Pressa foreseeing his death had shaken him, bringing back those old doubts and insecurities. ‘It doesn’t make sense.’ He repeated, throwing another book.

His patience was dwindling, not only because information was scarce but also because he felt he had secretly disappointed his crew—the ones who trusted him as captain and with their lives. He wanted to find the time and the energy to tell them, but he didn’t have the courage. He took a jug of water, drank from it, and then splashed some on his face.

There was a knock on the door. Sinbad looked up as Idris opened the door. She was a tall, tough woman with a steady, purple gaze.

‘What happened?’ he asked.

‘People are worried.’ she replied.

‘About?’ Sinbad asked as if he didn’t know.

‘The seer of the ship has just foretold that our captain will die. They are worried about that.’

Sinbad nodded, tired. ‘That I probably will. But if there’s anything that I know about myself, I am pretty good at changing my destiny.’

Idris smiled. ‘How is the research holding up?’

‘Reading about Beowulf isn’t much of a treat. The man is said to have been a powerful warlord who battled against a fiendish creature called Grendel, and even went on to slay his mother and a dragon,’ Sinbad commented, rolling his eyes. ‘Despite wielding swords such as Hrunting and Naegling, they proved to be of little use to him. Hrunting failed to kill Grendel, and he had to rely on his bare hands. If he couldn’t defeat a mere ogre with a sword, what hope would he have against the devil himself?’ Sinbad sighed as he opened a page and showed it to Idris. ‘Though, there was one sword that is not written about much. This sword belonged to a giant. He found it hanging in the cave where he went to kill Grendel’s mother and used it to kill her. The sword apparently was never found. It was destroyed with Grendel, but what if . . .’

‘In the other realm, it might not have been destroyed,’ Sinbad continued as Idris nodded agreement. ‘And also the Lamp of Set? The Egyptian god of chaos never had a lamp in the first place,’ he said, showing the picture of a god who had the indescribable features of an animal head. ‘He wasn’t a genie, though he was close to it. He was a trickster, surely. He killed his brother, Osiris, cutting him into pieces, and mortally wounded his nephew. He was a horrible god to begin with, but his death in this realm, at least is at the hands of his nephew. Horus.’

‘Probably he didn’t die in the other realm but got stuck in a lamp?’ Idris suggested.

‘Could be,’ said Sinbad with a shrug. ‘Anyone’s guess.’

‘What about the Poison of Asag?’ Idris asked.

‘That’s the most interesting one,’ he said, looking up. ‘The Hunter’s guild, also known as Ninurta, the Mesopotamian god of hunting and heroes,’ Sinbad continued, ‘is the one who defeated the giant serpent, Asag, in one of his many battles and hunts. This comes under the history of our very own, Ninurta guild. Nuhrad,

the first seid, even had a stone sculpture made out of it in the middle of the Baghdad guild. I remember seeing it as a child.' Sinbad recalled fond memories of how he used to walk the corridors of the guild, being scolded by his first master, Master Reis. He missed him, even though he was a horrible, horrible man. 'But it just says Ninurta used the talking mace, Sharur, to kill Asag. Though there have been some rumours that the Lake of Asag, where he had died, turned poisonous, which Ninurta drank and died as well.'

'What if he hadn't drunk it but stored it in another realm?' Idris asked.

'Yes,' Sinbad said, thinking. 'All these items don't exist here, but they could exist in another realms. I'm trying to find information about other realms, and the only thing I can search for is Norse myths. Heimdall had eyes and ears over each realm.' Sinbad talked about the Gatekeeper of Asgard, the realm of the divine. From the illustrations, he could see that Heimdall was a large man with golden teeth, golden eyes and probably a hint of golden skin too. He was holding a horn that would alert the realms he protected in the Norse myths.

'Then that is who we should consult first,' said Idris confidently.

'He protects the realms, surely, but only nine in the Norse myths,' Sinbad said.

'The nine realms are for the world, Sinbad,' said Idris. 'This much I know about these other mysterious realms—they are not supposed to be traversed. Doing so is considered a grave sin as it could lead to an imbalance in the entire order.' Idris explained. 'That is why the knowledge of the realms has been hidden for so long . . . until now. We must search for the gatekeeper. That's the only way, Idris.'

Idris nodded. 'But Heimdall, according to the many resources of the guild, can't be approached directly. Only when he *wishes* to meet, can you meet him.'

'I know,' he replied. 'People have used magic, sorcery, witchcraft and all sorts of bogus rituals to reach him, but none have managed to, so far. The guild has had a hard time doing so,' he smiled.

Idris chuckled too. She patted him on the shoulder as she walked towards the book lying flat, which had the artwork of Heimdall.

‘They are designed quite well.’

‘Oh yes, one of the few things I told Markus to do in his spare time, before this horror show started, was to make some illustrations. For a brute like him, he does some delicate, fancy work derived from the descriptions he has been given.’

‘Wow,’ Idris muttered, taken aback a bit. ‘What is this horn that Heimdall is carrying?’

Sinbad responded, ‘Um . . . Gjallarhorn—the one that will sound the warning when the apocalypse starts. It is blown by Heimdall since he will see it coming way ahead of time. It is a myth.’

‘I see,’ nodded Idris, ‘But I’m talking about the other horn. The smaller one with the stars on it.’

‘Oh um . . .’ Sinbad narrowed his eyes. ‘No idea, actually. Why?’

Idris was quiet, arching her brows. ‘I’ve seen this somewhere . . . And it was not on this golden-toothed god.’

‘Where else, then?’

Idris was lost in thought. ‘The Caliph’s study at the guild,’ she said after a long silence. ‘He has it in his cabinet.’

‘What?’ Sinbad said, startled. ‘I have been to his study but there was nothing there.’

‘No, you must have gone to his office. His study is where he keeps his artefacts. I was there when he assigned us a mission to apprehend the vampires. This was before I met . . . Emir,’ she said softly as she referred to her long-lost husband, pausing afterwards only to give a strong smile. ‘I remember it because I had seen it and I liked the design. And I know for sure it isn’t some cheap replica because the study has all sorts of crazy, authentic things in it.’

‘Wait you think Heimdall could have given this to him?’

Idris shrugged. ‘Given, taken, who knows? What I do know is that we now have a lead who knows Heimdall and has probably even met him. We should chase this, there’s not enough time to mull over the books.’

‘True that,’ Sinbad gritted his teeth, worrying about meeting the heir of the Abbasid caliphate, Harun al-Rashid, and informing him how he’d lost the mission the man had given Sinbad, disappointing him as a result. To top that, there was now this favour to ask, ‘*Hey, would you mind giving me a prized possession that was given by the god*

of gates so I can save the world . . . and lose again, probably?'

'Fine. Set course for Baghdad. We will use the skies this time.'

'Roger that, Captain.' Idris smiled as she made her way to the door, when she stopped. 'I'll go with you this time.'

Sinbad knew why. Emir, her vampire husband, was still trapped in prison.

'I understand,' Sinbad said.

Idris smiled a little. 'The world will end, and we are just pulling straws of a losing battle, but if it is ending, I would like to spend the dying days with my husband, in whatever capacity I can.'

Sinbad nodded. 'Of course, I understand. But how will we get to him?'

'That's my headache. You focus on the mission.' With that, Idris left, a smile appearing on her face.

Sinbad sat in the chair in his library, wondering whether he had someone he would like to spend his dying days with. Resting and pondering all the adventures he had performed the feats he had achieved to reach here, he looked at the ceiling, the doors. Slowly slumbering into deep sleep, only to open his eyes again, and find himself in front of a grey-haired man, with a thinly trimmed beard, and soft, sparkling blue eyes.

'Hello, here you are,' the man said smiling. He looked old and wise. 'Sinbad, it is lovely to finally meet you.'

'Where am I? Who are you?'

'Oh, don't you recognize me? Of course, you don't.' He smiled warmly. 'I am Iblis, after all.'

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FOUR

Sinbad screamed in shock.

Iblis yelped back. But soon regained composure, taking a deep breath. ‘Do not frighten me like that, son.’

Sinbad was confused. His eyes searched for some kind of darkness and some kind of hopelessness, and he found none. Rather there was warmth and hope. He thought he was tied down, but he was not bound. He could run and yet he didn’t feel like escaping. For there was no threat.

He was in a forest, in the woods where the crickets were chirping and the clouds looked beautiful. The sparrows chirruped, and the water coursed with a bright start.

‘Where am I?’ Sinbad asked.

‘Ah well, that’s a technical question. You are here, but you are also at your ship, I believe if my sources are correct. Which means your consciousness is with me, but your body is there, where you slept off.’

Sinbad blinked, confused. He looked at Iblis for a long time, observing his hair and the crown he wore. He had pure silver hair, like the moon, and the headdress fit well on it. He had hard features, as if he had returned from a war, and yet his eyes were soft. But his body was small—quite small—and not at all tough and burly. He also wore a large fur cape over his tunic, which was completed by simple sandals. He carried a short cane. He had no weapon whatsoever on him and no army behind him. Just a man.

‘I saw you . . . I saw . . .’

‘Yes, I know. That was basically me assembling my entire self.

That was me from the days of my life in Qlitop, where I was trapped for almost ten thousand years or more. I had stopped counting. But this is me . . . This is how I look.' He grinned like a buffoon. 'Sorry to disappoint. I believe you had a different picture of me.'

'Yes . . . Large horns, red face, dark eyes.'

Iblis laughed. 'Yeah, the classical representation by people who don't quite like me. But I am nothing like that.'

'But . . . but you are Iblis, the accursed, the devil, the keeper of darkness, the bay of demons, the enemy of people, shaitan . . .' Sinbad was losing the number of synonyms he could to come up with.

'You forgot "old scratch". I never liked that name. It makes me feel feline,' Iblis said seriously, 'Though, just for conversation's sake, I like to call myself Heylel, the light bearer. That's my original name, you know? Sadly, no one cares to be informed about it anymore,' he lamented. 'They all want a villain, and they made me one.'

Iblis stood up and offered his hand to Sinbad. 'Come on, why don't you stand up? I'll show you around.'

'What exactly are you going to show me?' Sinbad asked.

'My camp, of course. Unfortunately, you can only see them and not interact with them since you are here but not really here at the same time.'

Sinbad looked suspiciously at Iblis's hand. He decided not to take his hand and got up on his own. Iblis looked a little disappointed, but continued walking.

'How did you bring me here? *Why* did you bring me here?' Sinbad asked.

'First one is a rather straightforward answer: because I can.'

'And what about the second one?'

'Because you have questions, and I would like to provide you with answers.' His voice was smooth as honey.

The devil paused and looked back. 'You have been my enemy for quite some time now. You stole my daughter and thwarted my plans. I could never speak to you directly. I just thought it's time we met so you know what I'm up to.'

As they walked further, Sinbad saw elf children playing in the park. Unlike humans, they were dark elves. Draugrs, undead made of an amalgamation of things around them—were playing rock games. Nephilims, the fallen angels that Sinbad had fought and killed in plenty, now had families sleeping in tents, cooking food, and laughing. Large tents lined up to the hills where the horizon met, and werehyenas guarded the outskirts.

All of the enemies that Sinbad had fought were there, but here, they weren't threatening. In fact, they had families, children, and lives of their own. Sinbad couldn't believe so much had been created in the last couple of days before Iblis had appeared. Amidst all the creatures he saw, Sinbad hoped to see Safeena or Fatima, but they were nowhere to be seen.

'What is this?' he asked.

'A safe haven.' Iblis replied.

'For?' Sinbad's voice was filled with curiosity.

'For people like us, Sinbad. Well, not you specifically, but me and the rest.' Iblis clarified. 'I wanted you to know that all the villains you thought you fought for so long have families. They aren't just creatures. They are beings too, with hearts, minds, children, hopes, and dreams.'

A pang of guilt stabbed him in the heart as they entered the forest again and arrived at a small clearing where he stopped in the middle.

Sinbad could see the distant trenches of the island with the vast ocean stretching out in front of him, leaving the island surrounded by endless water. Apart from the herd of creatures, there was no other land in sight. Adding to the scenery, a colossal volcano stood tall on the island.

'As I told you, When I was created, I was the light bearer. We were all created by something . . . we don't know what, but we were given names, and this was the one I was given. You know, Sinbad, names hold a lot of power. Being Heylel, bearer of light, I was mean to illuminate the places I treaded and give direction to people. The creatures, the demons, they were all mine. I was their hero. I was a Ma'lak, an angel, and I had the responsibility to protect them. But the problem was, we lived in a barren land called

Qlitop. It was a terrible place with no water and nothing to eat. People became cannibalistic, and I couldn't protect them any longer. So, I called out for help. But no one listened. And then, one day, I was presented with an opportunity . . .' 'Ma'lak? Like Azrael?' Sinbad asked about the adversary who was also a fallen angel.

'Older than him. Quite old.' he replied, smiling at Sinbad.

'I was tasked with creating Earth. Along with many Ma'laks, we built the Earth that you know and live on,' Iblis continued, arching his brows. 'It was supposed to be for me and my people. After the barren land we lived on, getting this rich and fertile land was a blessing. Imagine my happiness. Whoever heard my voice was able to feel my joy. And yet, there was something amiss. Suddenly, mortals were roaming on the earth we built.' His smile faded. 'Imagine my shock when what I built for my people was suddenly taken from them, and they were left stranded. I was sad, quite sad. I felt deceived. So, I took a stand against other Ma'laks. I told them my people shall not perish or suffer like this, but they said they didn't care. Thus, the war began. I fought back, and my rebellion was taken as retribution. I was cast down at Qlitop along with my people. We were trapped there, with Ma'laks and humans fighting alongside each other.' Sinbad waited for Iblis to continue, but he didn't, so Sinbad asked, 'Is that why you are doing this? Ending the world?'

'No, no,' Iblis replied shaking his head. 'Why would I want to end something so beautiful? No.' He shook his head again as a deer with white antlers appeared, and he began to pat it. 'My words were always taken out of context. It wasn't to end the world,' Iblis paused, 'but to end the *people* on it.'

Sinbad felt a chill run down his back as Iblis's voice became darker and more ominous, like thunder. It was clear why he wore the crown; he had a clear mission, like a king. 'I'll stop you.' Sinbad said quietly, but clearly, clenching his teeth.

'The tour you took,' Iblis shrugged, 'it was to make you realize who you are against, who you are fighting. I know what you tried to do with your lovely seer of a friend. She's a fighter, I tell you. Got the right information out of the future, and I tried to stop her, but alas . . . couldn't.' He sighed. 'You can try to stop me, Sinbad.

But the intent of ending the people on Earth, that was an old thought, an old mission, so don't take it so personally.' He chuckled as if mass genocide was a joke. 'I have seen you and your little crew and your other handful of people. I have begun to trust your race more now than before. I want to work with all of you and figure out a way for us to coexist. And I'm sure we will. That's why I saved you all. You give me hope about humanity.'

Sinbad searched for a hint of lie, but he couldn't find one. Iblis was good, really good. But he wouldn't be fooled again like he did with Sakhr that time. He was manipulated by that ponytailed hag, but with Iblis, he had to be careful.

'I will never work with you.'

'Oh, unemployment can be quite tough, son,' he shook his head. 'I hope to change your mind, and I hope to see you again. But till then, only one request—stop chasing those objects, stop chasing all of that, and I promise, we will find a middle ground.' His smile wavered. 'It's a request.' But it sounded more like an order. And then Sinbad woke up, drenched in sweat.

The ship was rocking violently. Sinbad was disoriented and wondered how long he had slept for. Looking out of the window, he saw they were flying over Arabia, but something was obstructing their path. He could hear the crew shouting about fire and a commotion was brewing. Suddenly, Husayn entered his room, disheveled and out of breath.

'We have a code red,' he announced urgently.

Sinbad was taken aback. 'What's a code red?'

'Emergency!' Husayn exclaimed impatiently.

'Since when did we start having codes?' Sinbad queried, confused.

'That's not important now! We have a code red and it's right outside.'

Sinbad peered out of the window again, and what he initially thought were clouds, were in fact closer than he realized. It was a wyvern.

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FIVE

A wyvern, by design, looked like an ancient dragon—just a smaller, more poisonous and scaly-looking version of it.

By the time Sinbad reached the deck, he could see there was not just one wyvern but many. All huddled around the ship and circling it.

'What is happening?' Ashrafiyah asked, sprinting to his side.

Sinbad was thoroughly confused. He found himself high up in Baghdad, and given the city's heavy security measures and the guild's protection against such creatures, it was unlikely that any scaly serpentine dragons, including wyverns, would be seen here. Sinbad soon noticed something peculiar about the wyverns. Their necks were clasped in iron and their wings had silver punctures, as if they had been subjected to torture. They appeared to be young and under the control of an external force, moving against their will. It didn't take Sinbad long to figure out who was controlling them.

*

Amidst the clouds, skies, and turbulent winds, he saw the riders who were sitting atop the wyverns. They were seids, treating the creatures like mere pets. These riders had long capes that trailed behind them, adorned with the sigil of Ninurta—the very same emblem that Sinbad had embossed on his chest. 'Stop the ship.' Sinbad ordered. 'They are seids. They might want to talk.'

'That's not a good idea.' Idris said, standing by his side. 'The last

time we met them, they wanted to kill us.'

Sinbad paused for a bit. 'That's true, but these are dire times, and our enemies are friends now, I guess.'

Idris nodded glumly, not fully agreeing with the decision but going along with it nonetheless. The ship gradually slowed down as Markus instructed his crew to cease rowing from the lower compartments. Meanwhile, Ashrafiyah used her magic to prevent the ship from flying further as the wyverns continued to circle them in the sky.

Upon realizing that Sinbad posed no threat, the wyverns descended and perched on the ship, with one even coming right up to Sinbad. He observed the mini-dragon in its full-fledged, scaly, and unsightly form, adorned with green and black patterns and obsidian claws. The wyvern scowled and screeched at them menacingly.

'At the order of the guild . . .' began the flight master, who was seated on the dragon, just as Sinbad noticed the man's mole. The man too noticed Sinbad's irritated gaze and recognition dawned on him. 'Oh my god, we meet again, Sinbad.'

'Zahir,' Sinbad rolled his eyes. 'I shouldn't have stopped my ship for you,' he said to his natty rival, who had attempted to kill Sinbad during their last encounter while Zahir was on a mission to locate Sinbad and Safeena.

'Indeed. And look who else we have here.' Zahir chuckled as he stared at Idris. 'You have the betrayer herself. She was sent to spy on you and then she turned against the guild itself. And what else? You have a vampire. You have a . . .' he looked at Husayn, confused as to who he was. 'I don't know you. You must not be important.'

Zahir circled around, chuckling mischievously, as the wyvern he was mounted on growled menacingly. The crew members on the deck recoiled in fear, intimidated by the display.

'And to think, I thought you were just some enemies we caught during our sky runs. We would've brought you in for trespassing at such late hours, but . . . oh no, you aren't just trespassers. You stand accused of treason. You are betrayers and hoarders of evil,' the flight master sneered, directing his words towards Sinbad. His gaze then shifted towards the deck. 'Speaking of evil, where's the dear

girl? Is she on the deck?' The entire crew fell silent.

'You know we will search thoroughly until we find her.'

'She's not here.'

'Lies.' Zahir chuckled. 'And even if she isn't here, it's in your best interest to lower the damn flying ship and come to our level. I'm sure the Grand Master of the guild would love to meet you all and charge you not just for trespassing the holy grounds of the caliphate, but a whole lot of other things too.' He laughed. 'All of you, the ones who support him, will be charged on grounds of association and me . . . oh, I'll be getting a big fat promotion for sure.'

Sinbad paused, as all the crew just stared at him for a while, hoping for an answer. 'Zahir, Iblis has risen,' he began. 'The world is about to end, and this is a moment we should work together to make things right.'

'I see.' Zahir flew forward. His mole was more prominent now. Sinbad found it tad bit disgusting. 'More lies, I presume. Lower the damn ship. My team . . .' he gestured to the other wyvern riders, 'will make sure you land safely on a desert wasteland.'

'Sure.' Sinbad said.

As the people on the ship murmured amongst themselves, Sinbad spoke up, realizing there was no use arguing with the thick-headed Zahir. 'Guys, please. He's right. Zahir is right. We should do as he says.' Sinbad said, realizing that there was no point in arguing with him further, for he was a thick-headed individual who wouldn't know crisis if it stared at him in the face. 'All aboard, I believe we should lower the ship as instructed.'

He looked at Ashrafiyah and winked.

Ashrafiyah nodded, a smile spreading on her face. 'Lowering it!' she said as she created sparks of purple electricity from her fingertips, which formed a sort of bed underneath the ship. The vessel continued to go down gently till it suddenly started rocking.

The wyvern with its rider, Zahir, and the entire crew began to shuffle and bump into each other, tossing and turning.

'What is happening?' Zahir yelled at Sinbad, clearly agitated.

'Landing is always tough on these damn things.' Sinbad said.

Upon hearing the reply, Zahir was unable to respond any further.

‘Hold on to your corners,’ Sinbad shouted as he grabbed the edge of the ship, with others following the suit.

Just then, Ashrafiyah used her magic to suddenly flip the ship upside down. Screams accompanied a flurry of objects that were thrown down, such as caskets and barrels, and all the other materials on the ship. Only the people were suspended, holding on to the ship’s taffrail for dear life.

Taken by surprise, Zahir fumbled and flailed, grabbing on to his wyvern as the ancient creature flapped its wings rapidly, clearly agitated. ‘DAMN YOU, SINBAD!’ he screamed with all his heart. But by then, Ashrafiyah had turned the ship again to its normal position. ‘Hoist and move forward quickly. We don’t have time. Prepare the Greek Fires and raise the war flag. We are going into battle.’

Swiftly, the archers set up the equipment as Markus ordered them to shoot, while large ignited stones were thrown across the sky, aimed at the wyverns, who now screeched in anger and pain.

Sinbad unsheathed his sky-iron Thokcha sword as the wyverns opened their mouths and started to blast fire through the hull and the side decks. Sinbad saw Zahir on his wyvern chasing behind them.

‘Move fast! Throw the smoke!’

Jars of charred black ashes were brought up by his crew as they began to throw it into the sky, leaving a blanket of darkness, confusing the glares and the sights of the soldiers and their rides behind. The wyverns yelled as they lost sight, becoming temporarily blind. ‘Good,’ Sinbad grinned, by that time, Idris had caught hold of him. ‘What about the Caliph?’

‘We have to find another way to find Heimdall,’ said Sinbad. ‘I’m sorry, Idris. Emir has to wait. We are wanted people here. We can get imprisoned and that means goodbye to this world.’

Idris glumly nodded. Just then they heard someone yelling.

‘Someone is burning the ship from beneath. There is fire!’

They all realized that Zahir’s wyvern was now directly beneath the ship, burning the foundation from below.

‘Damn!’ Sinbad growled, as he rushed to the deck from his captain’s wheels. Holding the sword in his mouth, he grabbed one

of the many ropes of the ship and swung down. He didn't think twice in the dead of night as to why he was doing this. He just did it, in exhilaration, before Zahir was able to destroy the ship further. As he swung, the rope turned and so did he, using it to go below the ship directly where the wyvern and Zahir were. He kicked the man with the mole off from the wyvern, who fell on the front.

Throwing the rope behind, he jumped on the wyvern as Zahir tried to balance himself on it.

But Zahir grabbed hold of the sword and began to spar with Sinbad. They fought on the wyvern together with the bright moon behind them. They stood on the scaly skins as the ship now floated away from them, quite far away by now. Sinbad noticed that the wyvern, screeching with a strange, petulant noise, which hit the drums of the ears—was now aiming to fly directly into the ground.

He tried to pull the creature back, but as they were about to hit, they crashed on the ground and Sinbad tumbled far on the desert soil.

Zahir ran to him, wounded a little, just as Sinbad looked for his sword, Zahir kicked it behind him. The wyvern just observed them, balancing on the ground and shaking its head in confusion.

Zahir punched Sinbad in the face. 'I have always hated you.'

'The feeling is mutual.' Sinbad knocked him between the legs as Zahir cried out loud. 'I hated you the day you made me drink a sleeping potion in the middle of the class. It was so embarrassing.'

'I did it to embarrass you. Because you were on top of the class.' And he lurched at Sinbad, trying to punch him again but missing just as Sinbad kicked him in the chest.

'I'm not going to apologize for being hardworking. I used to stay up at night to work on all the assessments. I had the maximum number of hunt with my master. I was able to achieve so much in such a short time.' He grabbed hold of Zahir's long, frizzy black hair.

'Now look at you,' Zahir said as he grinned. His lips bled. 'Once a seid who could have become a master by now, you are a sailor and a traitor. How does it feel?'

Sinbad was quiet. He did imagine a life where he could have been that. Would life be different if he never killed his master? What

would happen if Safeena became a weapon for the Caliphate and the guild?

But while the *what-ifs* haunted him, he saw the torchbearers appear in a circle and the crossbows rising at his level. The other seids were here. They had circled him, and he was alone.

All alone.

His ship was gone, hidden in the clouds.

And he had nowhere to run. Zahir came to his feet and patted him on the back.

'Lovely,' he chuckled, 'let's take you to the Grand Master now.'

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SIX

Sinbad had never seen a court in his life.

He had been specifically told not to witness it ever, actually. It was considered blasphemous for a seid to even be in a position where the legalities would catch hold of him the back and bludgeon him.

But here he was.

Stuck. Bounded.

Sinbad was in a place where he could never feel comfortable.

He had always tried his best to avoid entanglement, having received explicit warnings from his master never to become embroiled in the legal system. For a seid, being caught up in the intricacies of the legalities was deemed blasphemous. And yet, here he was—bound and rendered helpless, with no escape route. Tormented as well if one were to express it poetically. Sinbad stood upon an elevated platform, encircled by countless seids, civilians, and soldiers, their collective gazes fixed upon him. Though he had encountered this scenario in the past, a sense of unease still coursed through his veins.

The trial had begun the day before, and he had spent the night in prison. In front of him, Sinbad could see a larger pedestal, much higher, with two thrones. One for the Caliph and the other for the grand master of the guild.

While the Grand Master would never sit on the same level as the Caliph, in matters dealing with a seid's crimes, he had to. He was an old and wise man. Sinbad had seen very little of him, and he wasn't even sure if he was the same man from his time or someone else

who had succeeded him, since they changed every five years.

But Sinbad knew that this was a chance to warn everyone about Iblis, so they could prepare and fight. Yet, he saw that the bureaucrats around him cared more about themselves than the impending world-ending danger. The speaker of the trial announced loudly, 'We welcome the Caliph, the honourable lord of the dominion and the ruler of nations, Caliph Harun al-Rashid. And we welcome Grand Master Sultan-e-Ahmed.'

Both men emerged from behind the throne and took their seats. Sinbad had encountered the esteemed Caliph on previous occasions, but now he appeared distinct. Adorned in regal garments, the Caliph donned an oversized robe, accompanied by an expansive, balloon-like hat and an abundance of jewellery. In contrast, the grand master appeared modest in a cloak with Celtic protection symbols. His white hair was tied in a bun, and his beard, sans mustache, was neatly trimmed. Notably, Sinbad observed a glass eye and a scar that traversed the area around one of the grand master's eyes. He hadn't heard of this grand master before. He must have been appointed recently. Despite his plain appearance, he had a frightening and mysteriously captivating presence.

'I've heard that the grand master is quite strict in his actions and decisions,' said Zahir, who was holding Sinbad from behind like an animal ready to be slaughtered. 'I'm sure he will not pity your position.'

'And what position is that?' Sinbad asked, but the grand master cleared his throat to silence them.

The entire court was silent. Sinbad was surprised by the number of people ready to hear him in his trial, even though he knew that his trial was much later than it should have been.

He glanced at the Caliph, who was not looking at him directly, probably out of disappointment or to show he was not in Sinbad's support. Some time back, it was the Caliph who believed in Sinbad and commissioned him to search for the tomb of Alexander in secret because he had been facing issues with the guild, a religious, magical supreme order that had secret dominion over the Caliphate. Harun knew they were extremists and did not like them. But he couldn't fight them back, in public, as it would lead to a massive

civil war that his human soldiers couldn't fight.

And so, he was here, siding with them.

'Sinbad, acolyte to the great and late Master Reis,' began the grand master Sultan, 'how do you plead?'

'Not guilty, my lord,' said Sinbad.

The grand master chuckled, and everyone murmured among themselves, wondering how Sinbad could speak so boldly.

'Not guilty, you say,' said the grand master.

A flying scroll in front of them suspended, from which the grand master now read:

'A few years ago, you were brought here with some leniency due to your young age. You were considered a suspect in your master's death and accused of being involved in the release of a weapon that could have greatly benefited the guild.'

'This weapon was a young girl, my lord,' he shot back, referring to Safeena, whom the guild sought to exploit for her powers to fight back evil. However, their method involved torturing her, prompting Sinbad to free her and ultimately kill his master. During the subsequent trial, the evidence was insufficient, and his age was taken into consideration; they doubted that a twelve-year-old boy could have killed Master Reis at that time.

The grand master growled. 'Speak only when asked, or face immediate beheading.' Sinbad nodded, silencing himself.

'So, yes, we shall proceed.' He began. 'Now, I'm simply curious. Not only were you given another chance, but you were also allowed to practice as a seid in Basra. However, our local reports indicate that you earned money as a seid, which is a serious offense.'

Sinbad raised his eyebrows. He hadn't anticipated that they would uncover all of this, but considering their deep grudges against him, he reasoned that a thorough investigation must have been conducted. 'We should have been aware of this; otherwise, we wouldn't have entrusted you with the task of finding the Trumpet of Israfil, which, as it turns out, you either couldn't find or deliberately concealed from us. You never returned, leaving us in the dark. Moreover, you managed to manipulate our invaluable asset, Idris Sheikh, turning her into your associate and brainwashing her. The two of you then launched an attack on the other seids at a motel

where you had concealed the weapon. As a result, we are left without the weapon, the trumpet of Israfil, and we have lost one of our finest seids. If we count you, we are now down by two, as the crimes you have committed against the guild are viewed as a display of your abilities.'

Sinbad was silent. The old grand master nodded to himself.

'No doubt, Sinbad, you have been a fighter. You have gone through a lot. You were once a good seid, trained by the best. But your crimes far surpass any good you may have done. We initially underestimated you, regarding you as a petulant child, and thus didn't spend significant resources on you. However, we no longer see you in that light because of your most recent crime.' he paused, reading the scroll, 'Bringing your catastrophic, black magic-infused ship into the city of Baghdad, where, according to the reports of acolyte Zahir, you are harbouring a vampire, the traitorous seid and a mix of others. You've brought this magical vessel here to destroy the capital of Arabia and reduce it to ashes.' Sinbad laughed loudly, causing shock among the audience.

'What are you jovial about, acolyte?'

'These allegations are simply exaggerated, my lord.' Sinbad said. 'Frankly, I agree with the previous allegation. Yes, I took money because I stopped caring about being a seid and used it to satisfy my own desires. Yes, I did find the Trumpet of Israfil and I threw it in the ocean. Yes, I even encountered Safeena, whom you label as a "weapon," but she is not one. Although, she was once with me, she has since vanished. Yes, I have committed actions that go against the guild, but I never had any intention to harm them. I have always been a rule-breaker, a rebel, but I am neither a terrorist nor a killer. I did not come to Baghdad with the purpose of destroying it, but for other reasons.'

He glanced at Harun, wishing for a glimmer of recognition, a sign that they had once worked together. However, Harun remained silent, deliberately avoiding eye contact.

'Enough. Given your past behaviour, we cannot trust you, and so we must assume the worst.' The Grand Master Sultan said. 'I often feel sad when our pupils go astray, and I blame myself. I wish things could have been different and they could have taken

different routes. In any case, it's safe to say that you will be considered a convict and you will be hanged—tomorrow itself.'

Applause filled the room, but Harun remained silent. 'What would you say, Caliph honourable?'

The Caliph nodded. 'I leave the just decision to you, grand master.'

More applause followed.

'Excellent, so it is settled,' said the grand master.

Sinbad felt a sharp pang of worry in his chest upon hearing the pronouncement of his death. Zahir, with an unusually happy smile, remarked, 'You deserve it.'

'Very well. However, I have one final request,' Sinbad addressed everyone. 'Before that, I would like to say something.' The grand master waited.

'The devil has risen,' Sinbad announced, eliciting gasps from the crowd.

'He is assembling an army, plotting something ominous, and I am unaware of his exact intentions. But he's waiting for the right opportunity.'

'Enough. Our communication with the Ma'laks has made it abundantly clear that such a situation does not exist,' The grand master said. 'They have not given us any warning, despite their promise to our first seid, our first hunter Al-Nuhrad, that they would stand by our side when Iblis resurfaces. Their absence confirms the absence of Iblis.'

Sinbad exclaimed in irritation, 'Because the devil is cunning! He deliberately avoids drawing attention to them. He operates in silence, plotting something sinister. I don't know the specifics, but I swear he is out there. He knows if he's noisy, it'll create chaos. His ultimate goal is mass genocide of humans, and he desires his race to reclaim dominance over this world. He knows that if the Ma'laks would be alerted, he'll be busy fighting them, squandering his energy and not focusing on his mission.' Sinbad conjured up this theory spontaneously, but it seemed logical to him.

Harun al-Rashid leaned forward, intrigued. 'Why do you make such a claim, young man?' 'Because I let him out, I know what he's capable of,' Sinbad replied. Everyone gasped again.

‘I made a mistake and he got out,’ Sinbad continued. ‘I couldn’t win. I tried to stop it, but I couldn’t . . . But if you hang me tomorrow, I just need you to know that I want you all to be safe. The guild was established by the great Al Nuhrad to combat the creatures of Iblis, and what purpose does it serve if they cease fulfilling that mission and instead, focus their efforts on a seventeen-year-old boy?’ Some snickered, while others nodded their heads in agreement. The grand master smiled. ‘Everyone falters in the face of death. You are pulling every trick out of the book to make us believe in your lies. I’m sorry, Sinbad, but that won’t work. I hope you seek your truth in another life. Take him away.’

With that, Zahir pushed him forward, and both made their way towards the prison cell.

‘What would you like for your final meal?’ Zahir inquired, a chuckle escaping his lips. ‘I can arrange it for you.’

Sinbad was indifferent to the idea of his last meal, but was consumed with worry about the noose that would soon be placed around his neck.

All the sins of his life came in front of his eyes, and Sinbad knew —getting out of this would be tough.

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SEVEN

‘99 . . . 100 . . . 101 . . .’

Sinbad performed push-ups, exerting himself as he balanced on a single hand, sweating profusely. His bare muscled body ached, but he paid no heed. Mentally, he was in a different place entirely. He could feel the pressure on himself; he realized he had grown up. He had come a long way from being a naive boy to a teen who was about to be hanged tomorrow.

The night was dark, and he was wondering about his crew. Where were they? Could they possibly be planning a rescue attempt? If so . . . how?

Sinbad pondered over these thoughts while leaning against the wall, buttoning up his shirt. His mind drifted towards Iblis. The devil was on a mission. He was a warlord and a peacekeeper at the same time. He seemed like a sweet man, nothing like what you read about in books, and yet he had a dangerous edge when he talked about genocide, as if humans were intruders belonging to a race, he neither comprehended nor desired to associate with.

But if only I could make him realize that the world is a better place because of humans. ‘Middle ground . . .’ he muttered to himself.

Could there possibly be a middle ground? If so, how could it be achieved? Sinbad yearned to discuss this with his crew, but the opportunity had yet to arise. If only there was a way . . . *A war can be stopped. Because who wants to fight? But Iblis was playing it smart too. Not alerting anyone. And letting Sinbad live.*

‘I have hope in you,’ he had said.

Maybe, I can change his mind further. Maybe, there is a middle ground. Should I meet him?

Sinbad nervously licked his lips, his mind filled with worry and contemplation. The weight of the stress he carried was so immense that he almost felt as if he could go bald from it. As he glanced at the fellow inmates surrounding him, Sinbad realized that most of them were individuals he had never bothered to get to know. A sudden desire arose within him to seek out and meet the dwarves who had once posed a threat to him during his previous stay in prison. It was during that time that he had embarked on a mission to rescue Emir, Idris's vampire husband who remained in a vegetative state. *He would still be here. I couldn't help him escape last time . . . but I could this time.*

'I would like to spend my dying days with my husband in whatever state he's in,' these words said by Idris had struck a chord with him. He couldn't be with the person he loved, Safeena, but he was determined to find a way to rescue Emir, no matter what.

But I'm going to be hanged. Great.

Sinbad closed his eyes, bracing himself for the inevitable, when the sound of approaching footsteps caught his attention. The footsteps grew louder, causing all the prisoners to fall silent, their eyes fixed on a familiar figure emerging into view. 'Ja'far?' Sinbad speculated. It was no surprise to him, as the vizier of the Caliph had always come to his aid in such situations. But it wasn't him. His attention was drawn to a man with a white-haired bun—the unmistakable figure of the Grand Master. He gestured to the soldier, who promptly opened the prison door for him.

He was standing tall and tough. For an old man, he had a brusque physique. In the amphitheater, he appeared threatening. But now, he looked even more formidable. 'Hello Sinbad,' the old man said.

Sinbad remained stoic, seated on the ground.

'How does it feel to be here?'

'I was here literally a month back I believe,' Sinbad said. 'It's the usual.'

'Were you?'

'Yes.'

'I didn't hear of it. Neither did the guild.'

‘You were probably not informed.’

Sinbad realized Ja’far must have had used his connections to keep his identity hidden back then when the human soldiers had caught him. But now, the seids and the guild were involved and Ja’far and the Caliph couldn’t get their hands dirty and be on the bad side of the mighty guild.

‘I wonder why,’ the old man shrugged. ‘The Caliph likes you it seems.’

‘Must be.’

‘I don’t know why. Do you deal with him?’

Sinbad shook his head. ‘I am just an ordinary sailor, my lord. Why would I have any dealings with the Caliph of our country?’

He nodded. ‘Hmm.’

‘I have a feeling you don’t believe me.’

‘I work on practicalities and evidences.’ The grand master said like a teacher who was being strict with his class. ‘And I have none for the statement you have made. So, I shall believe we move on from this.’

‘Whatever floats your boat, my lord.’

The man growled under his breath. ‘You are a troublemaker, Sinbad.’

‘I have been told that often.’

‘What do we do with you?’

‘Clearly, you are killing me, isn’t that your plan? Then why are you asking me?’

The grand master came closer. Sinbad noticed that the guard outside had been dismissed. The old man knelt down next to Sinbad, catching him by surprise, as someone of his stature had humbled himself to be on equal footing. ‘I can undo that.’

‘I see.’

‘I can just make the evidence disappear if I want.’

‘How exactly?’

‘I am a powerful man of the State, acolyte. I hope you know that.’

Sinbad nodded. ‘I would believe so.’

‘And I can do all of that for a price.’

‘Name it.’

‘What?’

‘Name your price.’

The old man had a smug grin on his face. ‘You seem like a rebel, so I’ll talk to you in that language. As you know, I have been appointed by the council recently to become the grand master. This was the first year where we introduced public voting. Based on my adventures and my hunts in making sure the monsters are at bay, I won the position. I did some diplomacy too, played some politics. Long story short, everyone loves me. My people, my bureaucracy and everyone else in the middle. You don’t get so much love by being honourable now, do you?’ he said. ‘I have a proposition that could be mutually beneficial. If you are interested, excellent. If not, I will see you at the hanging tomorrow.’

Sinbad narrowed his gaze. The grand master, who appeared as straight as an arrow to the world, had a multitude of plans swirling in his mind.

‘I want the weapon, Safeena. Do you have her with you? Hand her over to us and you are done. You will be left free in the wild. We will fake your death—show that you had escaped the prison and were killed offsite. You’ll be a free man.’

‘In that process, you’ll be more loved by people, right?’

He smiled. ‘Everyone frets about doomsday, but with the weapon on our side, that concern will dissipate, and my popularity will soar even higher.’

Sinbad nodded. ‘Just for my knowledge—this popularity, that you mention, means gold, right? You receive gold from benefactors, merchants who pamper you with riches seeking special protection in return.’

The old man smiled. ‘Don’t act as if you didn’t earn from your illicit activities as well.’

Sinbad shook his head. *So much for being good*. ‘Unfortunately, grand master, I really don’t know where she is. Safeena had disappeared long back and I have no clue where she went. She is with Iblis now.’

The grand master shook his head. ‘Once again with that nonsense. The Lord of the Dawn has not escaped his prison.’

‘You’ll probably realize I am right when the world ends before your eyes.’

The old man maintained a blank gaze, which stirred something within Sinbad's soul.

'So I have your answer then. You won't help,' he concluded. 'I have nothing to offer,' Sinbad said. 'And with all due respect, sir, you also have nothing to offer. My freedom was taken from me long ago, when I became a seid as a child. Throughout my life, I aspired to become a seid master because I believed they were heroes who fought for the greater good. I thought they protected the weak and battled against demons and evil. But I was mistaken. Heroes aren't defined by titles; they are defined by their actions. At least, with monsters, they are predictable. Humans, like you and me, are not.'

The grand master stood up and called for the guard.

'Good talk. See you at the hanging then,' he said curtly.

'Wouldn't say likewise.' Sinbad knew a shrewd politician when he saw one, but he never expected the leader of the guild to be so.

After the man had departed, Sinbad stood in front of the prison gate, gazing out into the empty, desolate corridor. As he did, a voice resonated from the adjacent cell. 'Good riddance,' a voice from the adjacent cell remarked. 'Well, thanks.' Sinbad said. 'You heard everything?'

'Cons of having strong hearing.'

'Ah, I presume you are a werewolf.'

'No, a vampire.'

Sinbad arched his brows. 'I'm Sinbad, and you?'

'Emir,' said Idris's husband, who had been comatose the last time Sinbad had met him. 'I'm Emir ibn Syed.'

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EIGHT

Sinbad had never felt so good speaking to someone for so long.

They talked all night—Emir and Sinbad. They talked about all the adventures he and Idris had undertaken. Emir listened carefully. The two couldn't see each other, but surely, they could feel the happiness in each other's voices when they spoke.

As the morning dawned, Sinbad felt exhausted and yearned for sleep. However, he knew that there was no point in succumbing to sleep right before his impending death. 'Ah, my dear hero,' said Emir, 'If I know anything, Idris is plotting our rescue right now.'

'Hmm,' replied Sinbad, 'You know, I thought you had been comatose. I thought you were beyond help.'

'You caught me at a bad time. I had just come back from something . . . my mind was in disarray, so I was convinced, my friend, that I was cooked to a crisp, like an overcooked turkey, you know what I mean.' He chuckled. 'But here we are, the brain has healed and so have I. I feel grand. As grand as someone who's going to get hanged soon.'

Sinbad sat up. 'You are getting hanged too? Why?'

'As revenge. I'm a traitor's husband. They believe that my death would lure Idris back and cause her to make a mistake, which they can then use to capture her.'

Sinbad growled. 'Why are they after us? They should focus on bigger, more serious things.'

'Because the creatures they hunt, apparently, they're not showing up on their radar. The humans don't need protection anymore, you see. So the guild is manufacturing villains to distract everyone.

That's what I heard, at least.'

'Creatures disappearing? Fits well with Iblis's entry,' said Sinbad, intrigued.

'Probably, if the devil has returned and they treat it like their father, why would they bother with creating little nuisances here, right? They'll go according to their father.' Emir reasoned.

'In a way, he's your protector too, right?' asked Sinbad.

'Yes, the vampires, or strigoi, as we are commonly called, trace our lineage back to Lilith, who was both the wife and, in some sources, the sister of Iblis. It's quite contradictory, the information out there. So, yes, lad, we are connected.' Emir said.

Sinbad had heard about Lilith, the first vampire, who was also from Qlitop.

'But I don't like him,' Emir continued. 'At least, what I've heard of him. Iblis used Lilith to create vampires and then discarded her. When he was imprisoned, he sent vampires to carry out his commands . . . Poor Lilith was used to bear his children. I feel sorry for Mother, but all of this is history, just words in books. We don't know much, lad. Just enough to spark pointless conflicts among people.'

Sinbad nodded in agreement. 'But I'm glad we are going to die together, you and me. I would love to shake hands, but hey, it's all right.' Emir said. He appeared nonchalant, composed, and carried himself with an air.

Sinbad yearned to delve further into the history of himself and Idris, but the guards abruptly arrived, distributing breakfast to the inmates. He pushed aside the plate of plain rice that was placed before him. 'What did you get? I got oats,' Emir said bitterly. 'I hate my life.'

'I got rice.'

'You lucky dog. Have it. Last meal and all.'

Sinbad sighed and began eating when he discovered something solid, buried in the heap of the rice. It was a key and attached to the key was a small parchment that read:

It opens every lock. Turn right. Escape through the window. Boat awaits you.

Sinbad smiled. But then frowned. There were guards outside and

Sinbad was confused who got him this. Was it the crew? Or was it someone else? He took the key immediately and put it in his mouth, under his tongue, while he pushed the plate outside.

'You had your food so fast?' Emir asked.

'Don't feel like eating.'

'You sound different.'

'Something got stuck in my teeth.'

'I know what you feel.'

What did that even mean?

Sinbad was confused. He held a key but didn't dare open the nearby keyhole. The area was heavily guarded, and fighting his way through would mean certain death. He needed to wait for the right opportunity. Just then, a bell rang as if on cue.

'THERE HAS BEEN AN ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ON THE CALIPH! REQUIREMENT OF THE SOLDIERS IMMEDIATELY TO APPREHEND THE ASSASSIN!'

Chaos ensued as the soldiers scattered from their posts. One of the remaining soldiers approached the leader and inquired, 'What should we do about the pending executions of the inmates?' 'Leave it. They can't escape. Just leave now. This is more urgent,' said the leader of the guards. Soon, all the guards had left.

Got the opportunity.

Sinbad took out the key from his pocket, cautiously inserting it into the lock. He came out without making too much noise, and constantly kept a lookout at the empty corridor. It was absolutely empty, and he liked the sound of it. The other prisoners adjacent to his cell looked at him in shock. There were dwarves, werewolves, witches and what not. Sinbad's gaze fell upon Emir's cell, where an intriguing figure awaited. Emir, shirtless and adorned with elaborate tattoos, possessed lustrous golden locks and captivating blue eyes.

Gods, he's beautiful.

'You must be Emir.'

'What . . . How did you . . .' Emir asked confused. 'Okay then. Open me up, lad.'

'Not gonna miss the opportunity,' Sinbad said as he opened the gate using the key. Emir came out and gave him a warm hug.

‘Can we leave?’ Sinbad asked.

‘Please lead the way.’

Sinbad tried to find the window as mentioned in the note. It was there at the end of the corridor where the hall was closing off. They swiftly set off, navigating through a crowd of ogres, mini-giants, and sorcerers. The clamour around them escalated, growing louder with each step, while they hastened forward, maintaining a vigilant watch over their surroundings. ‘Let us out!’ hissed some.

Among the chaotic scene, a banshee let out a piercing scream fueled by envy. They came across Cerberus, the three-headed hound with smooth, marbled skin, standing almost twenty feet tall. Its large, sharp talons were menacing, and it emitted a deep growl, clearly displaying its anger.

Why did they even trap it here? Sinbad thought to himself. Cerberus should have been killed at the sight itself, but they wanted to tame him probably, he reasoned.

‘Oi! The inmates are escaping. Catch them!’ One of the remaining guards shouted from behind, swiftly approaching them with a raised saber.

Sinbad and Emir turned back.

‘I can’t swear the name in vain,’ Emir said, ‘Since I’m a strigoi, but my dear, there are dozens of soldiers coming for us now.’

Sinbad glanced back to find numerous soldiers rapidly closing in on them. Nevertheless, they were nearing the window, drawing closer with each passing moment.

‘Jump out. I’ll meet you down,’ said Emir.

‘Are you sure? You don’t have weapons. There will be water—’

‘I don’t need them.’

‘Why . . . all right!’ He didn’t even complete the sentence as Emir lurched out of the building from the window.

As the guards closed in on Sinbad, he swiftly utilized the key to unlock the gates leading to the formidable Cerberus. It was a smart move that went unnoticed by the guards. Before they could understand what was going on, it was already too late. The three-headed dog stormed into the corridor, emitting fierce growls and barks, while Sinbad made his way towards the window. The guards scrambled to control the raging hound. ‘Best of luck!’ Sinbad yelled

as he jumped from the window of the prison.

Plunging through the air, he fell into the depths of the dark water. Before he knew it, Emir swiftly reached out, seizing his hands and hoisting him back to safety. They found themselves swimming in the boundless expanse of the blue lake, situated just beside the prison quarters of the city. ‘Now what? Keep swimming?’ Emir asked.

But before Sinbad could answer, he saw a boat approach The boat was rowed by a thin man with a long face and a pointed nose. He had a small moustache and long ears with gold hoops hanging from them. He was dressed in a robe decorated with rubies.

It was none other than Ja’far, the vizier to the Caliph.

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NINE

Upon reaching the mainland, Sinbad soon realized that they were around the outskirts of Baghdad. Both he and Emir were handed capes to wear, while shawls were provided to conceal their faces. The city had been placed on high alert due to the escape of two prisoners from the heavily guarded prison, who were deemed dangerous and destined for execution. Sinbad was returned the Thokcha, the sky iron sword and his Celtic rune tunic, a shirt that all seids wore to protect themselves. He was thankful that Ja'far had collected all the belongings from the quarters beforehand.

Ja'far guided them towards the House of Wisdom, a place that Sinbad was well acquainted with. He knew it to be the largest library in the world, a fact that had always captivated his curiosity since childhood. Unfortunately, access to it had been limited to a privileged few, and whenever the Caliph was present, it remained closed off to others. This prestigious library served as a repository for the various books amassed by the Caliphate during its numerous expeditions across the globe. As they walked, Sinbad and Emir didn't talk much, and they kept their heads low.

Soon they entered the library, the intellectual centre, with its beautiful tapestry of hardbound books all laid out. The space had a common recreational area with a small pond filled with multicoloured fish. There were rows and rows of books, and stairs that led to the top floors, where more books existed. It was a dreamland for anyone who loved reading.

As they entered, a few soldiers glanced at Sinbad, intrigued. But they were trustees of the Caliph. Having thoroughly inspected them

for any weapons, they were given clearance to proceed further.

Inside, by the pond, the Caliph was talking to a few of his lieutenants. Seeing the incoming party, he dismissed his agents.

'Thank you, Ja'far, Sinbad, and . . .' he looked at Emir. 'I have yet to be introduced. I assume you are a vampire.'

'A colleague's husband.' Sinbad said. 'I had to save him.'

'And how many times should I save you?' Harun asked softly with a chuckle.

'However many times your people capture me.'

'Oh come on, Sinbad, we both know the guild doesn't belong to the people or the Caliphate.'

Harun al-Rashid continued to move further to his office. Sinbad followed, taking off the heavy cloak.

'I assume have work,' Emir said.

The Caliph glanced at Emir.

'You can trust him.' Sinbad said.

As they entered the office, Sinbad passed the important collection of curios Idris had talked about. Among them, he noticed the horn, casually placed in a glass cabinet, an air of casual disregard for its real significance.

'More than work, I want to know why you trespassed and tried to come here.'

'We wanted to meet you. We were supposed to be discreet, but imagine our luck to find the bloody seids patrolling the skies.' Sinbad said.

Harun nodded, sitting behind the table.

'Excuse me . . .' Emir began eyeing Sinbad, 'But you are friends with the Caliph of the Empire? Just like that?'

Sinbad and the Caliph looked at each other and shrugged.

'He's the only person I trust here.' Harun al-Rashid said.

'The feeling is mutual.' Sinbad nodded with a small smile. 'Though, I couldn't report back about the tomb of Alexander.'

'I presume you lost?'

Sinbad looked at the floor, guilty. 'I found the pieces of the wonder-stone, but that led to whole lot of other problems . . . I'll rectify it in time. I have a plan.'

'And does this plan work?'

Sinbad felt a twinge of shame for disappointing the Caliph when he asked about his lost battle. ‘Do we even have a choice? Iblis has risen.’

Harun leaned forward, stress creasing under his eyes. ‘I heard that in your statement. Is it truly happening? Is doomsday upon us?’

Sinbad sighed. ‘Hate to say this, but yes, it is.’

‘Then god be kind to us,’ the Caliph shook his head. ‘Do you see him . . . the devil?’

‘More often than I wanted to.’

‘What’s he like?’ Harun asked.

‘Puzzling,’ Sinbad said.

‘How so?’ Harun asked, intrigued.

‘At one moment, he’s the strongest, most evil one in a room and in another situation, he might be the most justifiable one. He’s trying to get into my head, but he also wants to find a truce.’

‘Then let’s give him that,’ the Caliph said slowly. ‘If we can trust him.’

‘That . . .’ Sinbad began, ‘is one thing I cannot promise. He’s the devil, after all.’

Harun shook his head. ‘This looks worse than ever. We are stuck in this web of frustrating guild rules and regulations. The bureaucracy has been quite bothersome, and the guild is becoming more corrupt than ever.’

‘But you are the ruler of the people. You must have some plan.’

‘And risk a civil war? That would be unwise,’ Harun replied, looking nervous. ‘I don’t want bloodshed.’

‘Inaction is also an action,’ Sinbad said as Harun clenched his jaw. He realized that the young boy was right.

He sighed. ‘Lately, I discovered that they’ve started accusing women of witchcraft. They have burnt women alive . . . attacked whoever has stood against their rigid code of conduct.’ He shook his head. ‘I tried to reason with them. Told them that they were just some rebels, but they don’t want to argue about this. They are beyond my control. I want to stop them, I just don’t know how. I feel powerless and helpless.’

‘Excuse me, but a leader who doesn’t listen to the people they serve is not a true leader,’ Sinbad said, and while he had said it for

the guild, it also held true for Caliph, who had been inactive so far.

Sinbad continued. 'Push them to agree that Iblis has risen and prepare your defenses. Alert the other parts of the world. They must all get ready.'

'Yes, true. But on what grounds?' said Harun. 'There's no evidence.'

That is true, thought Sinbad. *Iblis was a mystery. He operated in the darkness, no one knows about his plans, and he's careful not to make any noise.*

'Then let me stop him,' said Sinbad. 'I have seen him, and I don't need evidences.'

Harun looked into Sinbad's eyes with great resolve. 'What do you need from me? I want to help.'

Sinbad licked his lips, leaning forward. 'I want you to introduce me to Heimdall.'

There was a pause. Sinbad noticed Harun's eyes looking at the horn.

'Heimdall, you say?'

'Yes. The watchman of the gods.'

'What do you need him for?'

And so, Sinbad explained everything to Harun, from the beginning to the end. He explained the existence of multiple dimensions and the crucial mission of retrieving objects from those realms. By the end of the conversation, Harun was shocked.

'That's a lot to process.'

'True.' Emir finally spoke. Till now, he had been fidgeting with his nails and trying to make sense of what was happening. 'I have been digesting it since yesterday, amour,' he said referring to the discussion he and Sinbad had last night at the prison.

'Did you just call me amour?' the Caliph raised his brows not used to being spoken to this way..

Emir sat upright. 'Love. To me, everyone is equal, you know how it is.'

'Whatever,' Caliph said, rolling his eyes, 'I know Heimdall. I've met him too. He had disguised himself as Lanfried, an emissary of Charles the Great during our relations with the Frankish ruler. At that time, we all had one goal—to defeat the Byzantines. They were

against the religious supremacy of the Caliphate, and knew we were growing and expanding our empires massively, so they considered us a threat.'

'I have met Constantine, and let me tell you he's one wacky kid.' Sinbad rolled his eyes. 'He loves killing people. He even imprisoned his own mother. He's just a ruthless dictator.'

'In another realm, I would have been that too.' Harun chuckled. 'I was given the responsibility of the entire Caliphate when I was just fifteen years old. My brother, Al Mahdi, died quite young due to the intense political struggle. It was very different from what I'm going through now, but, in a way, quite similar too. I could have become a spoiled brat myself, but instead, I became responsible, thanks to the memory of my brother,' he said while playing with a ruby-encrusted ring on his finger. 'There were rebellions, assassination attempts made on him . . . I realized it was better to be quiet than to fight back. I invested in myself, studying the arts, culture, and religion of our land and of the world. I let the guild run freely only to be tied by them in the end. Oh, how I feel stuck now.' He shook his head regretfully, running his fingers through his scalp. 'Anyway, Heimdall or Lanfried, as he was known then, had disguised himself and I happened to figure out his identity. After all, he had golden teeth. We shared sherbet together. I figured he saw me as a just and able ruler, like Charles the Great. That was when he gave me this gift.' He walked over to the horn and picked it up. 'He told me to call him whenever I needed him. This horn will summon me to his land.'

'And did you ever?'

Harun shook his head. 'I never had the need for it. I didn't want to waste the valuable time of such an important god like him.' he said. 'But there's something about him . . . Heimdall could see and hear *everything* across *all* the realms but more importantly he could *see* a person really well, if you know what I mean. He would only help those who would have a quest to help others. I was just made a ruler then. Who knows maybe he foresaw that one day I would want to help you, and that I would need his help. Maybe that day is today.'

Sinbad looked at the Caliph, 'The end of the world is a sign of

urgency, yes?'

'Definitely.' Harun said, picking up the horn. 'He probably saw that one day I might have to give it to you. Just make sure you use it wisely.' He handed the golden Norse artefact to Sinbad who held it against his chest.

'Of course, I will.'

Harun nodded. 'Heimdall knows when someone has ill will, so make sure your heart is in the right place.'

Though the horn was light in weight, the gravity with which the Caliph spoke made it feel heavier. Harun put his hand on Sinbad's shoulder. 'Perhaps the next time we meet, son, we will meet without any worry. Perhaps the next time we meet, we will meet with no agenda but as old friends. Perhaps the next time we meet, I won't have to get you out of prison again.' He chuckled with a warm smile. 'Third time is the charm, they say.'

'Your highness, I don't want to go to the prison again, so I'm sure we'll meet in better pastures.' Sinbad replied with a smile.

They looked at each other just before a loud noise indicated the arrival of a soldier.

'My lord, there's been a problem! The Grand Master is here with his seids. He commands to meet you immediately.'

Sinbad arched his brows.

Harun clenched his jaw. 'What does he say?'

'He says you harbour inmates of his prison.'

Sinbad looked at Emir—they had to leave immediately.

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TEN

‘Use the back exit,’ said Harun, pointing to the wall behind him. ‘Take the staircase till you see my gryphon waiting for you. Use the creature,’ Harun ordered Sinbad. ‘He will drop you off and return here.’

‘What? I didn’t know you had a damn gryphon as your pet,’ said Sinbad, shocked.

‘I never liked those creatures—half lion, half bird—but this one was gifted to me by the previous grand master. The man caught it and tamed it. Goes by the name of Smith. He was a kinder man, the grand master. Didn’t want to kill the creature . . . Well, this is it then. Cheers, my friend. I bid you goodbye for now. And one last thing, this horn is enchanted and will guide me towards you. If I’m able to make it out alive, I’ll come to help.’

And with that the Caliph disappeared to meet all the soldiers that were gathered at the gates with their grand master.

Sinbad and Emir made a move for the stairs. From the top floor, Sinbad saw what was happening at the main gate through a small window. Dozens of seids in their long cloaks, carrying staffs, wands, and blades had gathered. They were in armour and had come prepared.

Harun had come outside, and Sinbad heard him say, ‘What is the meaning of this, Sultan?’

‘A Caliph can be replaced,’ the grand master said. ‘Your brother had entrusted you with this position when you became the successor and now you harbour criminals.’

‘I cannot tolerate these unfounded accusations, and it is

particularly unwise of you to involve my brother in this conversation.'

'Why not? I served him as his personal seid when I was younger. And clearly, he was wiser than you,' the old man rasped with poison in his voice. 'Clear the way, Caliph, or you shall have a problem on your head. The people must get their justice.'

'This is a library!' The Caliph screamed in anger. 'Stop being an idiot, old man.'

'I have other ways to enter too.'

The soldiers of the Caliph now came in front with spears and swords, ready to fight the seids.

The grand master chuckled. 'Your iron cannot even pierce our armour, and yet you challenge us. You are asking for a battle you can't win.'

Harun was quiet. Sinbad almost wished that he would fight back and not be nervous about it. Not run away from battlefield.

Emir tugged at Sinbad. 'We need to leave. The gryphon is right there.'

Sinbad nodded reluctantly and approached the colossal bird. It possessed the majestic wings of an eagle and even bore a visage resembling one, but its body was sturdy like that of a lion, with razor-sharp claws capable of penetrating the thickest of armours. The creature loomed impressively, and as it caught sight of them, it unfurled its wings with a powerful flap. 'Let's leave, Smith. I am a friend, not a foe.' Sinbad said to the bird, who just made a loud squawking sound and blinked its eyes in confusion. The gryphon was chained to the roof, it seemed.

Sinbad broke it loose and tried to mount the magical gryphon. As a seid, he had training flying creatures big and small. Gryphons were fun. They acted like dogs and loved some petting. Not only were they quite insecure and needed the love of their master, but they were also hyperactive and could be unpredictable, especially when flying.

Sinbad and Emir both sat on the creature.

'One day—a seid, a vampire and a gryphon entered the tavern,' said Emir. ' . . . I feel there could be a joke here somewhere.'

'I like the mood you are in, but we are . . .'

And the bird zapped in the skies, flying straight up that they both yelled in horror before it stabilized.

'What were you saying?'

'Does it matter anymore?' Sinbad asked.

'Also . . .'

'Yes?' Sinbad asked.

'Do you have a friend who wanted to tag along?'

'No,' Sinbad answered confused.

'So why is there a wyvern following us?'

Sinbad glanced behind him and noticed Zahir swiftly closing in, nearing their position alongside the gryphon. 'Okay, this is not good. He just can't live in peace.'

'What do you want me to do?' asked Emir.

'Handle the gryphon.'

'But I can kill the one who's following us. I'm good at killing,' said the vampire.

'We do not harm our own. It is a principle I abide by, inherited from the time of the seid, unless it is a matter of self-defense. I shall make an effort to reason with them.'

Just as the wyvern drew closer, Zahir approached with his staff in hand, shouting, 'You thought you could get escape?'

'How can I? You don't leave me in peace.' Sinbad retorted. 'Listen, Zahir, I don't want to fight. I know you want to . . .'

However, Zahir swiftly flung his staff, unleashing a spell in the form of a fiery projectile aimed directly at him. Sinbad instinctively evaded the attack, narrowly avoiding its trajectory. 'Did you just try to burn me to death?'

'You must be executed!' Zahir screamed.

Sinbad shook his head. *He's an idiot. He was always one.*

Just then another flame shot towards him. Sinbad deflected it with his sword.

'Move faster,' he told Emir.

The gryphon dove below and the wyvern followed, moving in tandem as they raced towards each other, sending balls of fire at Sinbad who deflected them with his sword.

'You were always the class pet,' screamed Zahir.

'And you were the one who never studied,' Sinbad retorted.

‘But look where we are.’ Zahir said. ‘You are the convict and I’m the hero.’

‘I’m sorry!’ Sinbad cried out, his voice echoing through the air. The gryphon ascended rapidly, with the wyvern closely tailing behind. ‘What?’ Zahir looked confused.

‘I’m sorry for always treating you wrong.’

‘You . . . wait . . . what? You never treated me wrong.’ Zahir said, bewildered.

‘No. I . . . I cheated.’ Sinbad said, hanging his head. ‘I was smart. I was a wisecracking buffoon, and I cheated. I was never good at things. I was never a good hunter. But I was always good at hustling, and that’s what I did. Due to that, you were always sidetracked by everyone. I should have realized what impact it would have on you.’

‘You cheated?’ Zahir raised his brows, confused. ‘Did you think that would make me less angry?’

‘I don’t know . . . I just wanted you to understand that I’m not as brilliant as you may believe. You’re right . . . that’s why you’re there and I’m here. However, we’re facing greater challenges, and I don’t want to compound them by resorting to violence and taking your life.’ Sinbad sheathed his blade. ‘You are a good person, doing what you think is right.’

Emir rasped from the front. ‘What? Are you mad?’

Zahir, for a second, was confused. Till he swooped in the front, and using the tail of the wyvern, smacked them off from the gryphon. They began to fall on the ground, straight for their heads to be smashed.

‘Was this your plan?’ Emir shouted amidst their tumultuous descent. ‘To apologize? I could have snapped his neck. Now what’s our course of action?’

‘What plan?’ Sinbad strained to catch the first part, his confusion deepening, which only heightened Emir’s concern.

‘Oh, fantastic!’ Emir cried out in distress. ‘We’re going to die.’

Sinbad, in the middle of the air, tossing and turning, pulled out the horn and blew it as hard as possible. But nothing happened. They were reaching for the ground now, close to the sand. And then suddenly, darkness consumed them.

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ELEVEN

Sinbad experienced a sensation he had never known before—the feeling of dissolving into the sand beneath him. As he fell, expecting a bone-crushing impact on his head, he and Emir were instead enveloped by the sand, their bodies melding with it. A sense of panic consumed him as he desperately struggled to propel himself forward, striving to break free from the sand's grasp. 'NO! NO! HELP!'

But there was no one to answer. Emir's cries could be heard on the side, and just before it was too late, Sinbad closed his eyes as sand went into them. When he opened his eyes again, the sand had transformed into leaves and fresh tulips. Just then his nose pricked with the scent of nature, and he saw small imps running around, their tiny bodies covered in fur and their faces twisted into mischievous grins. He also saw frogs leaping on to the flies that swarmed and the tall groves surrounding them. They found themselves amidst a verdant forest. Sinbad's gaze fell upon Emir, who appeared motionless at first glance. However, Emir's eyes met Sinbad's, and with a faint voice, he inquired, 'Is this the realm of the afterlife?' 'Oh! It's better. Much, much better.' Sinbad grinned as he looked ahead. A long and towering bridge connected the forest to the ocean ahead of Sinbad and Emir. As they approached the bridge, they noticed that the people on the bridge were dressed in a way that was unfamiliar to them. Some individuals went without shirts, while others adorned themselves in loose garments that exposed skin. Despite their unconventional attire, the people were busy with various tasks, and lamps jutted out from the corners. The

signet gold coating glimmered across the bridge, adding to its otherworldly beauty. At the end of the bridge was a large gate that almost touched a rainbow.

'We are in Himinbjörg,' Sinbad said. 'Heavenly mountains.'

'I don't see any mountain.' Emir said.

'Look where we are,' Sinbad replied, and they both glanced below the bridge. Indeed, they were in the upper realms of the largest mountains, where falling would mean instant death. 'Behold the Bifrost, the fabled rainbow bridge that grants passage to other realms. I, myself, have never set foot in such a divine region. I have only heard about it.'

'And this god . . . he drank sherbet with the Caliph?'

'Gods, particularly those of Norse mythology, like sherbet. Offer them some, and they shall share their wisdom in return. Come, let us cross the bridge. We might find the ruler of this celestial realm.'

The duo rose from their place and walked towards the bridge. As they approached, a delightful scene unfolded before their eyes. Here, they witnessed people playing music, painting, and selling cherries. The sight was filled with beauty and happiness. 'I love how they are so free . . . not bothered to wear clothes and all. I wonder who they are.' Sinbad told Emir, who by then had taken off his tunic. 'What is wrong with you? Why are you taking your clothes off?'

'Oh, the breeze is beautiful. Let us dance, lad!' And he jumped over to a bunch of people who were using playing a strange kind of music on their harps.

Sinbad rolled his eyes. 'Can we go, Emir? We don't have much time.'

'Oh, please, lad. Don't be a spoilsport. Join in the fun and let loose!' Emir said, with a playful enthusiasm, pulling Sinbad closer and attempting to coax him into dancing. 'We will keep saving the world, but if we don't enjoy the little pockets of fun in the middle, we won't be able to move on. I used to always worry about escaping the prison, being with Idris, getting my brain fried whenever I tried to escape. And now look at me. It all works out eventually. Simply keep trusting.'

'Trusting whom?' Sinbad said. 'Trust in god? Trust the people

around you? Trust in the devil?'

'No, lad,' Emir cheekily grinned. 'Trust yourself. That's the only trust that matters in the long run.'

Sinbad didn't realize that the statement had more power than he had expected. Sinbad chuckled as the music became louder and he started to dance. When he stopped, he found himself facing a beautiful woman with blonde curly hair. She wore a white dress that covered her from her chest to the thighs.

'Hello, fellow travellers. I am Pokk, the thrall that serves the house of Heimdall the Great. How do you do?' she said.

'Oh, the wonders of this world! Isn't she beautiful?' Emir exclaimed, his grin widening as he paused his dance.

'Let us not forget, my friend, that you are a married man,' Sinbad reminded him.

'Ah, but that doesn't prevent me from appreciating someone's beauty and paying them a compliment, does it?' Emir replied, reaching out to take the woman's hand and gallantly kissing it. 'How do you do, madam?'

Pokk's face lit up with a grin. 'Thank you ever so much, but Lord Heimdall eagerly awaits your arrival.'

Sinbad and Emir followed the thrall. As they made their way, Sinbad observed how diligently and affectionately the people tended to the House of Heimdall and its surroundings. It was clear that these tasks were not forced upon them, but rather performed with genuine care. This indicated a culture of respect and well-being, which permeated the serene and prosperous atmosphere of the land.

After a while, they reached a quaint cottage, which had a thatched roof that was being repaired by people. There was a beautiful garden of lilies too, where a large man with an abnormally big stomach stood. He donned a coat resembling fur and a Norse helmet fashioned from rhino skin, crowned with two protruding horns. He had a golden beard, golden teeth and his eyes were otherworldly, something dark.

'My dear Pokk!' he growled, taking a swig from his goblet of mead, 'The lilies have not been tended to. How do we plan to care for them?'

‘My lord, it shall be done,’ Pokk replied.

Heimdall continued, ‘And the mead is over. Refill it, will you?’

Pokk nodded and refilled Heimdall’s goblet.

‘And my back is aching,’ Heimdall groaned.

‘I’ll give you a massage, my lord,’ Pokk offered.

‘First—I dare say, make me that lovely soup with broccoli and wolf’s flesh. That is indeed tasty.’

‘My lord, these are the two guests of yours.’ Pokk said. ‘And my guests, this is none other than the great Heimdall, the ruler of this land, the gatekeeper to the realms of realms and the one who sees everything, the wielder of Gjallarhorn.’

Sinbad couldn’t believe he was meeting a god and extended his hand to shake Heimdall’s.

Feeling giddy with excitement, Sinbad felt as though everything in his life had led to this moment. However, much to their surprise, Heimdall let out a resounding burp and clumsily toppled on to both Sinbad and Emir.

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TWELVE

A serving of broccoli and wolf's flesh soup was set before the somewhat drowsy Heimdall, who struggled to rouse himself from the slumber. Sinbad and Emir sat at the far end of the wooden dining table, observing the god as he cautiously sipped the repugnant, yellowish-purple concoction. 'Pokk! Give me the elixir.' Heimdall said, in his brute fashion. 'Put it in my soup.'

'But my lord, it gives you strange nightmares,' the woman replied.

'I don't care. When you watch over the realms, nightmares are just another dream.' He looked up at Sinbad. 'The things I've witnessed, my boy, are truly terrifying.'

'I'm sure, my lord.'

Pokk took out the elixir, which was in a vial. It was crimson in colour, like blood, but had flecks of gold in it. Heimdall drank the soup and he grinned from cheek to cheek.

'Ah, what pleasure!' he said and thumped the table and causing it to rock. 'Courtesy to my dear Pokk, I have been enjoying this for the last couple of days.'

'What is the elixir made of?' Sinbad asked.

'*Eitr*,' she said.

'Eitr?' Sinbad raised his brows.

'Also called *atter*, I believe,' Emir said. 'The same power from which the creation of the worlds came to be. Even Lilith, when she created the vampires, used the magic of Eitr. She did this by cutting her wrists and letting the Eitr bleed out of her, wishing on a race that would be her champion. But the power of Eitr is only possessed

by those who were originally exposed to it. Eitr allows you to make almost anything. You can create races, build worlds and use the power for just . . . anything. Scary, and yet strong.'

'We use a very diluted form of it,' Pokk said. 'You can say it's almost an imitation of the original form which is strong for even our gods, and difficult to find too. Almost impossible.'

Heimdall thumped the table so hard that it cracked. 'NONSENSE! I can drink it and feel my bones again. But true that, sir!' Heimdall pointed to Emir. 'Eitr is what has created the world. Eitr has what helped the god Ymir, the first giant, to create the Norse world as we know it.'

'That's a good history lesson, my lord but we are here on a mission.'

Heimdall nodded. 'Indeed. You took the horn from the boy of Baghdad.' He didn't seem intoxicated now; drinking the elixir shone his eyes with wisdom. 'He must have given it to you for a reason since he was a wise boy, giving you this prized possession was imperative.'

'Yes.'

'Give me the horn.'

Sinbad took it off his girdle and passed it to Pokk.

'Good. Now you don't need it anymore,' said Heimdall taking the horn.'So tell me, what can I do for you?'

Sinbad explained his story from the beginning, and the god of gates listened carefully, sometimes picking his gold teeth, sometimes cleaning his rhino horn helmet and then, in the end, he just burped and said, 'So you believe the world is ending?'

'Yes.'

'And the devil . . . this Iblis . . . he has risen?'

'Yes.'

'And you think I wouldn't know this?'

'I mean, I don't know, my lord.'

'The funny part is I don't,' said Heimdall innocently. 'I haven't heard of it, one bit. I haven't heard about Iblis rising, though. I had been keeping an eye on him at Qlitop. He's quite a naughty creature, pals with another swine I know. Loki.' Heimdall shook his head. 'You may have heard of Loki, the notorious god of trickery.

He's quite the rascal. However, I haven't received any indications of his presence, and with my ability to perceive entire realms, I can confidently say that I haven't witnessed him there. Thus, I believe your information is wrong.'

'Could you check again? I'm not wrong, my lord. After all, I released him, so . . .'

Heimdall growled under his breath and then shut his eyes. The next time he opened them, they were full of multitudes of colours. It was as if he were scanning something across different realms, to find Iblis or to know about his nefarious plans. After a while, Heimdall came to his normal sight.

'Neither did I hear nor did I see anything. Sorry, boy, but you could have released someone else, probably an imitator who went by the same name.' Heimdall pushed the chair behind him, indicating the matter was closed.

Sinbad almost felt like pleading. 'Regardless, my lord, let us at least try to stop him. My seer promises these objects that she saw in her vision can stop him, and so if we go to other realms and . . . '

'Go?' Heimdall laughed, punching his belly in the process. 'Do you know what you're speaking of? Jumping realms is no small feat. It disturbs the order of the universe. It disturbs the order of order. There's a reason why each realm has its own rules and regulations. There's a reason why it is not allowed to traverse multiple realms. That's cheating. That's finding a shortcut to your problems. People have done it, no doubt, but they have been hunted and killed after that.'

'By who?' Emir asked, raising his brow.

'By me, of course,' said Heimdall. 'I allow or disallow who uses the realms, and no one can do it without my permission. Bah!'

Heimdall gestured to Pokk to hand him his fur coat, which he wore again. 'I'm sorry, gentlemen. I wish I could have helped you, but I believe the enemy you face is not the enemy you think. Otherwise, I would have seen it.'

'He could be smart, my lord.' Sinbad gave it his last ditch effort. 'He could be doing it under your nose. Iblis has a way to manipulate . . .'

'Do you think he can manipulate me? BAH!' Heimdall laughed.

‘The little pansy is nothing to me. An ant. A boil on my head, on a bad day.’

And with that, Heimdall walked out, leaving the room, and saying, ‘Stay the night, gentlemen. Leave tomorrow. Pokk, provide them with a good bed and some food.’

With that, the god left them.

‘We have lost,’ Sinbad said defeatedly. ‘Without Heimdall’s permission, we cannot enter these realms.’

Emir patted him on the back. ‘But think about what he said, lad. Could it be that the Iblis you released is not even the *real* Iblis?’

As they left the room, Pokk led them down a hallway and showed them their quarters. It was a small room with two beds and a fireplace. A pot of stew bubbled on the fire, filling the room with a savoury aroma.

Sinbad sat on the edge of one of the beds, feeling defeated. ‘What do we do now?’

Emir sighed. ‘We keep searching for the truth, my friend. And when we find it, we’ll know what to do.’

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THIRTEEN

Sinbad's sleep would not have been interrupted if it weren't for his unexpected meeting with Iblis yet again.

Clenching his teeth, he woke up to find himself in the common halls of a wooden palace of sorts. It was nothing like the island that he had seen earlier. This place was rugged and darker, and the raging storm outside blew harsh winds. It was an erratic change that confused him. Sinbad observed a meeting taking place in the hall. A lot of people, big and small, sat around the long dining table, eating roasted lamb, chicken and turkey. There were goblets overflowing with wine, and the gathered guests laughed and joyfully joked with each other. Outside, the storms intensified.

Suddenly, the scenery changed, and he found himself at the edge of a cliff.

'Ah, here you are.' A thin, warm voice, somewhat familiar, came from behind. 'How do you do, son?'

Sinbad turned to find the old, meek man with silver hair and a warm smile. He limped a bit, as if a piece of flesh of his limb had been taken out, which it had, for Safeena was born out of his limb. His diadem was lopsided, as if he had just rushed from somewhere urgent.

'It's not the same place anymore.' Sinbad said, even though he wanted to say a lot of things other than what he had just said. 'It was an island, but now we are in the mountains. What is going on? Who are these people I see at the feast? Are they even real?'

'I assure you, son, everything is real.' Iblis smiled warmly. 'Yes, the visions change the locations from time to time. It is so that you

wouldn't be able to know where I am and alert others about my presence. You must understand, I have a lot at stake and I have to take precautions for the people I protect. The ones you saw earlier.'

'How do I know that they are even real?'

'What is real, what is not, only the heart knows. I have been getting alerts, by the way, of your transgressions. You have been talking about me to others. Is that how you want to extend your hand for friendship?'

'I don't want your friendship.'

Iblis paused and looked at Sinbad, raising his brows. 'I am sorry to hear that. I really meant when I said that I want to find a middle ground. Thus, I've brought you here before you talk to others about me and my plans, even though you know none of it.'

'I'm sure it's diabolical.'

'That sounds cliche. I'm not a bad man. I am a man on a mission. Protector. Light-bringer. Heylel. Remember that name?' He came on the helm of the table, where different sets of people sat that Sinbad had not known about. 'These are my close bunch. You can't talk to them. They can't hear you. They can't see you. But you can hear our conversation. And you'll know I'm sincere in my intention.'

Then Iblis sat on his throne and said to the lot in front of him, 'What should we do about the humans?'

'Cast them to Qlitop. That world is all right for them to survive,' an old man with a bald head said.

'True that, Cronus, I have built a fairly modern world in there during my imprisonment,' Iblis said.

'And they are savages after all,' a woman with raven black hair, a shroud covering her face, and long black nails said. 'All of them. Primitive. They'll go back to their basic forms once they leave Qlitop.'

'But the entire humanity to be cast in Qlitop? Fair to say, Qlitop is not that big at all.'

A man with snake tattoo on his head, leaned forward, 'If I may, Heylel?'

'Yes, Apep,' Iblis allowed.

'We can decide who will come to Qlitop and who will not. Once we ride together to perform the ritual, we will choose the worthy.

Probably half the population, probably even less.' Apep continued as if mass killing was like forking through a piece of turkey.

Iblis nodded. 'I know who is allowed from my end—Sinbad and his crew. They have been great foes to me, and I always love people who show persistence. Sinbad almost indulges me with his naiveté and his childlike ability to think he can make a difference.'

Sinbad clenched his fist at that statement.

There was a chair that was empty on the other end of the table, which Sinbad noticed.

One of the other members said, 'Be weary of that one. He might be inefficient and absolutely reckless, but even something as small as a thorn poses a problem when it stabs your eye.'

Iblis smiled. 'True. But one has to be as *effective* as a thorn in the first place to prick us.'

That is when Sinbad realized the faces. Though they weren't the way they were written about, he could finally notice that bald man was Cronus, the god of time. The snake-tattooed man was Apophis, the god of chaos from the Egyptian myths. There was the Slavic witch, Baba Yaga. There were others he couldn't recognize but seemed equally dangerous and scary and . . . apocalyptic.

The chair on the opposite end had a name. Sinbad leaned forward to see. 'Loki.'

All of a sudden, Sinbad grabbed hold of Iblis and shoved him to the ground. The entire crew of Iblis, however, didn't notice this. But still, Iblis was on the ground as Sinbad punched him in the face again and again. He wished he had his sword, so he could drive that into him.

'We don't want your pity.' He pulled Iblis up, holding him by the collar, as the devil remained placid. 'We don't want you to think about us. The human race has evolved without your pity.'

Iblis began to bleed now, and Sinbad noticed the blood. It looked different.

But oddly familiar.

'I have been nothing but kind to you, son,' Iblis coughed up blood, spitting it on the ground. 'You shouldn't hit me like that.'

'Remember this. Remember the day you bled because of a mere human.'

Iblis smiled. Just like always, he gave his condescending grin. And then he snapped his fingers.

Letting the nightmare end, he unknowingly gave Sinbad enough to know how Heimdall had not been able to see Iblis at all.

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FOURTEEN

Sinbad was being shaken. When he opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was Emir.

'Time to go, lad.'

'No,' he mumbled.

'What?' Emir said. 'What's wrong with you? I need to meet my wife; I have been going on multiple adventures with you back-to-back. Is this how it is with you all time?'

'Unfortunately, yes.' Sinbad stormed out of his room.

They were met by Pokk outside. 'Gentleman, your gate awaits for you to leave.'

'I would like to meet Lord Heimdall before I leave,' Sinbad said.

'I apologize, but he's on top of the gate to Bifröst to check on some debris issues.'

'But I would like to still see him. How do I go on top?'

'Erm . . .' Pokk began to contemplate what to say. Seeing this, Sinbad rushed out, and Pokk, along with Emir began to follow him.

'Gentlemen, that is, um . . .'

Sinbad didn't listen. The moment he was out of the cottage, he began to move for the gate, which was the largest in size and where the rainbow met at the end. Though it was a tough task to go there.

How does one even travel upstairs?

As Sinbad ran, he noticed the presence of manually-operated lifts tucked away in the corners. Sinbad swiftly headed towards the trolley, with Pokk and Emir following behind. 'If you are going, we are coming too,' said Emir.

'Good,' Sinbad exclaimed, grasping the lever tightly to hoist the

trolley upward. With each passing moment, they found themselves suspended hundreds of feet above the ground. When they reached the upper levels, they saw structures and even wider roads for people to travel. Some people were working on the gate, keeping it strong for anything that could happen.

It was tough to see anything else for some time given the glow, but Sinbad kept walking. He found Heimdall, who was instructing one of the thralls about the use of the bricks and cement, the magic to be followed, the runes that would be drawn to create them together.

Heimdall saw Sinbad and was surprised. 'What are you doing here, boy?' He looked less intoxicated now; his body was majestic, triple the size it was last night. He was towering over them.

'I have some news for you.'

'Before I leave, I must tell you again. Iblis is real,' said Sinbad.

Heimdall rolled his eyes. 'How many times are you going to try?'

'I'm serious. Iblis is real and I know now why you cannot see him.'

Heimdall shot him a look. 'What do you mean? Not see him? I see *everything*. Do you think my abilities are weakening?' he said angrily.

'No. Iblis is good at concealing. After all, he got the best person to do that,' replied Sinbad.

Heimdall narrowed his gaze. 'What are you talking about? Do what exactly?'

'The elixir that you drink with your soup. You see, it's made of Eitr, surely, but it is not *diluted* as Pokk says. It is pure, as if bled from the originally exposed deity, someone like Iblis, who was, after all, one of the few early creations made of Eitr.' Sinbad said. 'Through the means of the powerful Eitr, which is his blood in a way, he has used a way to hide himself and blind you to his existence. Iblis used Eitr to blind you, but in a way that you wouldn't be informed to stop him when he destroys the world, thus, preventing you from the blowing the horn and waking everyone up.'

'That is preposterous,' said Heimdall, but then paused to think. 'How do you know it is his blood?'

‘Because I punched him in my dreams.’

Heimdall gawked, ‘Do you know how ridiculous you sound?’

Sinbad shrugged. ‘He has been using dreams and nightmares to communicate with me. Why? I do not know. But he’s planning something big. Really big. And Loki, your enemy, is involved in this too.’

‘Loki? Working with him?’

‘Yes.’

‘Wrong. I see him in Jotunheim.’

‘That must be just an apparition. But he’s not there.’ Sinbad gritted his teeth. ‘He’s right here actually. With you.’

‘What? Here?’

Sinbad turned to Pokk and said, ‘Would you or should I do the honours?’

Pokk, the beautiful woman with golden locks, found herself bewildered. ‘Gentlemen, I have no idea what you are talking about. My lord, I told them you are quite specific.’

‘In the beginning,’ Sinbad circled around the so-called thrall, ‘I was a little perplexed. I have heard this name, Pokk, somewhere. It’s another name for Loki. Remember the time he disguised himself as an old hag who was not ready to shed a tear when Baldur died. It was later revealed that the old hag, named Thokk, was actually Loki in disguise. Here, he wasn’t a hag but a beautiful woman who wanted to charm you. You were lonely and he used it against you.’

‘You think I wouldn’t have known if it was Loki?’ Heimdall spoke confidently, which soon turned to confusion. ‘I would have known . . .’

‘Arrogance is your weakness, my lord.’

Pokk chuckled suddenly. ‘This is outrageous, my lord. I have been nothing but . . .’

Heimdall put his hand up. ‘I remember now. You did happen to come out of nowhere and became my close attendant.’

Pokk rolled her eyes and didn’t wait any further. Her body suddenly transformed into a large serpent, which spat poison at Heimdall. He fell to the side, his skin burning rapidly.

Sinbad pulled his sword and leapt to battle the serpent. The rainbow colours beamed from behind.

The serpent spoke, ‘I was very close to doing my job and you had to make it difficult.’

He turned to the original form of Loki—a tall, lanky man with red hair, wearing a long green cape. He was handsome but also had a shrewd look.

‘You could have left without dying here, but alas, we need to do what’s important now.’

Heimdall writhed in agony on the ground, his skin burning and blistering from the serpent’s poisonous venom. He cried out in pain.

‘The good part is,’ said Loki, ‘I fed him enough Eitr to actually not be able to see Heylel for some time, till our actions take fruition,’ he smiled. ‘But what do I do with you? I have been instructed to not create issues by Heylel, but I can always say that it was an accident.’

Just then, from behind, Emir lurched at Loki, who instantly vanished and appeared behind Sinbad with a knife at his throat. He was so fast and clever that it was almost difficult to follow his actions. Emir growled in anger, his canines protruding out and his nails growing long. He looked like a true vampire now.

Seeing the chaos, the other thralls started fleeing the bridge, screaming in terror.

‘Na na na, vampire boy. No point attacking me when I have your friend’s neck on my blade. So, accident it is then,’ Loki said, thrusting the knife next at Sinbad’s neck. ‘What should we do? Should I take you to our domain from where we go on the ride?’

‘The ride, what is this ride?’ asked Emir.

‘If I told you, I would have to be an idiot and I’m not an idiot. That brute . . .’ he gestured at Heimdall, who was still struggling, ‘. . . is one. What a stupid man.’

‘At least an honourable one,’ said Sinbad.

‘And what does honour bring?’ Loki asked. ‘Only death, unfortunately.’

Saying this, he pushed the knife into Sinbad’s throat. But nothing happened as the knife sprung back. The Celtic runes of Sinbad’s tunic glowed.

‘What is that?’ Loki asked confused.

Sinbad didn’t wait; he skidded and kicked Loki, tossing him on

the ground.

Once again, Loki transformed into a serpent, spewing forth another venomous assault. Sinbad skillfully evaded the venom by swiftly rolling aside. Loki tried again, but by then Emir leapt on him from behind, scratching and plunging his nails on his skin. The serpent hissed and tried to shake Emir off. Its tail slashed at Sinbad, smacking him as he rolled over to the ground. Sinbad instantly rushed towards the serpent, went beneath its body and leapt from behind to stab it in the neck, while Emir held on to it.

The serpent whipped Emir to the side. The vampire, disbalanced, almost fell from the bridge. Seeing this, Sinbad rushed to him and caught hold of his hand, pulling him up.

As the two stood up, they saw the snake slithering away from them. ‘So long; I will meet you soon, hopefully.’ Saying this, the serpent changed into a sparrow and flew away.

Heimdall, burned and weakened by poison, attempted to rise and hurl his sword at the bird, but succumbed and fell. Meanwhile, Loki had vanished.

The three looked up to see Loki, who was long gone.

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FIFTEEN

Heimdall was resting on his throne when Sinbad entered the main halls of his cottage.

As he laid eyes upon the god, he noticed that, despite the thralls' earnest attempts to nurture him, he appeared frail. Heimdall smiled weakly at Sinbad and Emir.

'Ah, saviours,' he chided under his breath, 'How have you been?'

'Throwing the question back at you, man,' said Emir. 'You look awful.'

'Loki's poison takes time always to wear off,' sighed Heimdall. 'But never has he been this smart.' He shook his head. 'You were right,' he nodded to himself, begrudgingly conceding that the two guests had been correct. He halted and gestured for one of the thralls to cease wiping the lingering traces of poison from his body. 'You were right, and I was a fool. I didn't see what was in front of me.'

Sinbad couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction as the god complimented him.

'We must alert everyone that Iblis is here. And Loki is a part of his game.' Heimdall said.

'I would suggest otherwise, my lord,' Sinbad said. 'Let them worry about the horn that will be blown to alert others about their presence. I think we should prioritize locating Iblis, but first, you need to wait for the Eitr to wear off.'

He cast a questioning gaze, 'Are you sure?'

'Yes. What good would it do if everyone was informed? We don't have his location and he's good at hiding.'

Heimdall pondered for a moment. ‘Then how will we stop him?’

‘Let me obtain the artefacts. Let me enter the other realms,’ Sinbad said quietly.

‘I knew you would suggest that,’ Heimdall shook his head. ‘And no matter how dangerous it is, I have begun to believe, that it is the only way to go. Tell me, do you trust your seer?’

‘More than my life,’ replied Sinbad.

Heimdall smiled. ‘Good. I’ll plan a strategy and see how I can help you. I’ll find his location in the meantime. Gods, for someone who can see everything, I have been quite blind. The irony of it all is not lost on me.’ Saying this, the god twisted his hands and began to snap his fingers. Soon, the three small spheres were suspended in the air. ‘These open the gates of the three realms where the objects are. The blue sphere is where the Poison of Asag is, the red is where the sword is, and the white is where the lamp is. Go, and retrieve these.’

The spheres just floated in the air before hovering over Sinbad’s open palm, who grabbed it. The spheres felt heavy to him, even though they were minute in size.

‘Whenever you want to enter the realm, just close your eyes and press the button on the sphere in your hand, the portal to that realm shall open.’

Sinbad nodded.

‘Just remember one thing, and this is a very important thing,’ said Heimdall seriously.

‘Yes?’

‘Whatever object you bring from another realm, you must return it. Because if you don’t or if it is destroyed in a world that it is not from, the entire three worlds will converge with each other and this will create massive chaos. Think of these objects as the souls of each world, these souls should not be away from their bodies for a long time; otherwise it’ll be worse than the end of the world. It’ll be the end of the three realms all together. Imagine the humanity of these three realms all in one place.’

Sinbad didn’t want to; it looked terrifying. ‘Of course,’ he said, ‘I’ll return it once they have served their purpose.’

‘Good. I sense honour in your words. I’m sure you’ll do well. I

see . . .' he paused, looking at Sinbad intently and said, 'Let's not go there,' he chuckled, 'I am sure you will do well.'

'Umm . . . Thank you.' Sinbad said. 'I would like to return to my ship.' He glanced at Emir. 'I would really like to check up on my crew.'

'Yes.' And Heimdall swished his finger. A portal, purple and red in colour, opened up in front of them. As he began to walk to it, Sinbad glanced at Heimdall and said, 'Don't feel bad, my lord. I think you are second guessing your abilities, but you have good intentions.'

Heimdall smiled, but it was a defeated smile. Sinbad walked into the portal, with Emir by his side. The portal opened to a large colourful corridor.

'I don't want to ever go on an adventure with you.' Emir cried out. 'You have some bad luck, lad.'

Sinbad laughed, 'Been happening for a long time.'

Emir let out a weary sigh. 'I yearn to reunite with my wife. I miss her.' As they emerged from the colourful tunnel, their footsteps led them on to the ship's deck. Surrounded by endless stretches of water, it appeared as if they had found themselves in the heart of the sea.

Upon reuniting with his crew, Sinbad had a lot to share. However, when he caught sight of Idris's astonished expression as she joyfully leapt into Emir's open arms, he chose to remain silent, allowing the poignant moment to unfold without interruption. Sinbad smiled warmly at the sight, but before he could react any further, he saw that Idris's face was not filled with joy upon seeing him return. Suddenly, he was taken to the ground with great force and realized that he was being pinned down by one of Markus's men.

'What is happening? Hey! I'm the captain of the ship!' he cried out.

Just then Markus walked up to him.

'Sinbad, we know. We know what you did,' he said. 'You struck a deal with Anansi.'

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SIXTEEN

Sinbad, with his arms tied behind his back, was on the verge of being thrown off the ship.

The sea looked less hostile than usual. But still, there was no sign of land.

'This is unnecessary!' Sinbad shouted.

He could see his entire crew staring at him furiously, clearly indicating that they did not want him on board.

'This punishment is too severe. I don't know how to swim.' Sinbad lied.

'He's right,' Husayn chimed in, sounding concerned. 'I think we should let go of this transgression.'

Markus, however, puffed his chest in anger. 'I do not care. He doesn't deserve to be captain. He worked with Anansi and let us all suffer.'

'Please, Markus. I can explain, and have so much to tell you all. Now's not the right time to dig up the past.'

Idris spoke now, somewhere behind him, It's all right, Markus. Scaring him with a plank is punishment enough for now. I'm sure Sinbad knows he's done wrong.'

'No!' Markus growled. 'Don't you understand? He made a deal with someone who's sure to get out. And if he gets out . . .' he shuddered.

'How did you get to know if I may ask?' Sinbad asked.

'He himself informed me. He was waiting for you to complete the deal,' Markus replied.

Sinbad sighed. The ship rocked a bit, and he almost lost his

balance. ‘Okay, I’m sorry, but I can explain. Let me get back on the ship.’ He turned to move towards the ship when Markus drew out his sword.

‘Come on, my friend. I apologize. I know I should have told you the reason, but I didn’t because I thought we were going to win. I was arrogant and vain, but not anymore. Anyway, I’ve found a way to fix things. We can now enter different realms and travel to different worlds. I have the spheres that will help us travel realms. Heimdall gave them to me as he believes in our mission. We can defeat Iblis now.’

‘You think we trust you now?’ Markus asked.

‘He speaks the truth.’ Emir said. ‘I saw it with my own eyes.’

Ashrafiyah raised her brows. ‘We don’t trust him. But we will keep an eye on him. That’s the only way.’

‘Fine by me,’ Sinbad said. ‘Now can we all talk?’

‘You don’t know what you have done, Captain.’ Markus said, with anger in his eyes. They seemed puffy, as if he had cried all night. ‘You must really figure out how to stop Anansi now.’

Sinbad couldn’t understand or fathom why it was so important. What had Anansi done to Markus? What could he have done to him?

As he was deep in thought, the ocean crackled, rocking the ship. The plank disbalanced, and he fell from it, splashing deep into the water. His body grew heavy as he became completely drenched. He looked up at his crew, who were all watching him from the ship, laughing.

’All right. Haha,’ Sinbad said. ‘Pull me up now.’

Husayn loosened the end of the rope tied to the ship and threw it towards Sinbad. Sinbad started to free himself.

‘Great, throw me a rope now, will you? Let me climb up.’ Sinbad requested.

Husayn called out, ‘On it!’

The rope was thrown, as Sinbad began to swim towards it. Suddenly, he had a feeling that something or someone was out here. He turned around but found no one. The ocean looked innocent—kind and gentle. The sun blazed on the far horizon, and the sunlight blinded him a bit, just before he saw the shark fin popping out of

the water. It was speeding towards him now.

'Okay, we have a shark here!' he screamed. 'We have a predator who feeds on human flesh. Great! I think I'm going to die. Not killed by the devil but by a bloody shark.'

As he reached the rope and tried to pull himself up, the great white shark leapt from the water and grabbed his jacket. It began to pull him down.

'I need a weapon!' Sinbad shouted. 'A sword, please! My sword.'

'I'm getting it,' Husayn called out.

But as Husayn tried to throw the sword into the ocean, because of the unstable ship, he tumbled into the water as well.

'How did you fall?' Sinbad screamed as Husayn splashed in the water, breathing hard.

Everyone on the ship cried out, worried sick, as they saw the shark disappearing back into the water.

'Quick. Reel us in.'

Sinbad and Husayn tied the rope to their waists. The crew hurriedly pulled them up.

'How clumsy can you be?' Sinbad yelled.

'Is that a rhetorical question?' Husayn asked. 'It was an accident.'

But they couldn't talk further, the shark burst out of the water and lurched at them. The crew yelled in shock. In a sudden twist, the shark changed its course and went straight for the rope, its razor-sharp teeth clamping down on it.

The force of the tug was so strong that Sinbad and Husayn were both yanked off their feet and plunged deep into the water, their hearts pounding with the realization that the shark was now hunting them down with deadly intent. As they struggled to keep afloat, Sinbad raced towards Husayn, only to see the predator closing in on him from below.

I don't have time.

Sinbad fiddled through his pockets and took out a sphere. He couldn't see what colour it was or where it would take them, but there was no time. he pressed a button on its surface. And just as the shark opened its jaw, ready to eat them, Sinbad grabbed Husayn by the hand.

And they both vanished from the ocean, teleporting to another

realm.

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SEVENTEEN

Sinbad and Husayn found themselves in a tunnel that reminded Sinbad of his previous encounter with Heimdall's realm. The tunnel glowed with vibrant hues, reminiscent of a dazzling rainbow swirling around.

'Okay, where are we?' Husayn asked as they walked further into the tunnel.

'A path to the other realm,' said Sinbad as he continued walking.

'I'm scared,' Husayn whispered.

'So am I.'

'I never thought we would end up here.'

Sinbad sighed and just then he heard a loud booming sound that echoed through the tunnel. It was familiar, reminiscent of a Norse god.

'Hello there, fellow travellers. I am Lord Heimdall, the watcher and protector of the gates. To make sure everything is within bounds, here are a few rules for you to follow, since you'll be moving from one realm to another.'

Husayn shrugged. 'Nice voice. Very husky, you know.'

'Yeah, he's quite a big man,' said Sinbad.

The voice continued, 'When you enter this world, make sure the sphere with which you enter is on your person. Do not lose it, because if you do, you may never come back. This would have dire consequences: the worlds would all converge. Unfortunately, that's the problem with realms. If you meddle in its business, it begins to collapse. Think of it this way, all realms are actually one entity, but they are divided to things sane.

‘Regarding the world you are about to enter, it is a far more complex world than you can imagine. And finally, if you accidentally return to your own world before completing your quest, you cannot come back here again. There are no second chances. Once your work is done, I will know and will come to collect the object from you. But you cannot travel back yourself.’

Heimdall then proceeded to describe the geography, culture and history of the place, readying them for what they can expect to see in this world. Sinbad and Husayn were at the end of the tunnel by then, ready to pass through the gate.

‘Okay this sounds intense,’ Husayn said.

‘Yes.’

They entered a jelly-like substance, and as they walked through it, they suddenly found themselves falling from the sky.

‘Was this planned?’ Husayn yelled.

As they were falling rapidly, Sinbad couldn’t recognize the world he was entering. He could see a balloon like structure in the front, and his body slammed against it. Husayn began to slip down, spiralling downward, trying to grab on to something, while Sinbad saw an entry to the deck and rolled over.

Realizing where he was, he figured they were in a kind of a ship that had a balloon on top, and was floating in the sky.

There were similar ships, all floating in the middle of the colourful sky.

The airship that Sinbad was on seemed to be on the brink of a battle of some kind, as there was a ruckus going on and a lot of bullets were being shot from makeshift guns. Sinbad would have no idea what guns were if it weren’t for Heimdall, who explained them to him.

Sinbad figured he was on a pirate ship of some kind because most of the people he saw there were filthy, had a lot of battle scars, and many had lost limbs. These people were fighting what seemed like a police ship on which there were some strange creatures who did not appear human. They wore soldier’s uniform.

These are similar to the uniforms of the Caliphate’s royal guard. Blue, red and purple in colour . . . But what are these creatures?

These automatons were machines with clockwork-like

mechanisms attached to their chest. The pirates didn't notice Sinbad and Husayn, who were trying to hide on the side of the ship.

'So, to sum it up,' Husayn said nervously, 'we are on a pirate ship, in the middle of the sky, in a different world, fighting the authorities here.'

Sinbad nodded, looking at the sideboard of the ship, which had these words flashing: PROPERTY OF JULIO VERNE.

Interesting.

Sinbad decided to look for something that could help them land. Being used to ships and what they contain, he silently moved to look for a tender, a small boat that is often attached to ships, but there was nothing of the sort.

Just then, the captain of the pirate ship yelled, 'ATTACK!'

The ship instantly turned on its turbo and slammed into the police ship, causing everything to topple over. Sinbad and Husayn were on the ground, trying to reach out for some kind of support to hold on to.

'Hey you! Who are you? We don't know you!' A loud voice boomed.

Sinbad and Husayn turned nervously to find a multiple-eyed, pasty-haired man staring down at them. He had one human arm, while the other was a mechanical limb.

'You are an intruder. You wear strange clothes,' he said, looking at them with suspicion.

'Says the person with weird floppy arms,' Sinbad replied.

The pirate looked annoyed and surprised. 'I lost it in the war. A war against demons, he said impatiently.'

'I'm sure,' Sinbad replied, but his response was drowned out by the man's loud order.

'CATCH HIM!' the man yelled, angrily.

Sinbad tried to run to the other side, as some pirates began to chase him and shoot at him with guns. Looking for a way out, Sinbad noticed some pirates flying into the enemy ship with the help of a device that they wore on their backs, which emitted a small blast of fire propelling them forward.

'We need to get one of those,' Sinbad said to Husayn.

Just then, the pirates appeared in front of them as Sinbad took

out his sword.

'I'm sorry. I don't want to be here at all,' said Husayn.

Sinbad grunted as he deflected the attacks, kicking the men on their stomachs and punching them in the face.

'The feeling is likewise, boy!' a voice said. As they heard the voice, both Sinbad and Husayn turned to see a man with a face resembling a fish with watery eyes. Sinbad guessed he belonged to some mythical race, but he looked almost humanoid. Sinbad's attention then shifted to the flying bags.

'Stay behind me,' Sinbad said, as he moved for them, sparring with the soldiers, and deflecting the oncoming attacks. As he fought with one, he grabbed one of their weapons. Heimdall had told him about these, they were called guns and they were important to this world. 'The gun is a lethal instrument. All you need to do is flick the lever,' he'd said. Sinbad now tried it, and true to what he'd been told, it sparked off a small canon. Despite being unable to hit anyone, Sinbad's use of the gun was enough to create a distraction and buy him time to make his way towards the captain. The captain, who had a crooked leg, was not paying attention to Sinbad and Husayn's presence on the ship.

The captain turned to face Sinbad. 'Who are you?'

Sinbad, having the element of surprise as an advantage, didn't bother answering and delivered a hard punch to the captain's face, rendering him unconscious. Sinbad then retrieved the flying device.

'Since we don't have a lifeboat, and we are in the air, we've got to do what we've got to do,' Sinbad reasoned.

The pirates were getting closer and aiming to shoot them, but Sinbad grabbed Husayn's hand and jumped off the ship, shouting, 'This is not our war.'

'Do you know how to fly this thing?' Husayn shouted back, the wind whipping at his face.

They were flying straight down to the eponymous city of Baghdad, named after its founder, Baghdad-Al-Mansur. It looked very different from how it appeared in their own world.

'No!' Sinbad replied.

'Why did you take it then?' Husayn asked, ashen.

'Got to try, right?' said Sinbad as he searched for a lever and

found a button. He pressed it and the flying bag behind him generated fire.

'It says this is a jetpack,' said Husayn. 'What is a jetpack?'

'Clearly wants us to fly?' replied Sinbad.

'Shouldn't it be called "fly jet"?'

'Good point.'

But the throttle didn't stay for long, as the fire began to burn out, they started falling faster towards a clock-tower. Husayn asked, 'Before we die, can I try something? I see some kind of lever. Should I push it?'

'Do what you must,' said Sinbad

Husayn pushed the lever, and the wings of the jetpack opened, giving them flight. Sinbad manoeuvred them in the skies, above modern bazaars, beautiful towers, roads, carriages with horses, large lamps, and colourful fairs and carnivals. Sinbad's eyes fell on a large flashing screen that read:

'AT THE DIRECTOR'S MUSEUM, THE COLLECTION FROM HIS VOYAGES WILL BE UNVEILED. AMONG THE HIGHLY COVETED ARTEFACTS, THE SWORD OF BEOWULF STANDS OUT AS A PRIME ATTRACTION, SET TO BE REVEALED TOMORROW.'

And on the screen automatically, the image of the Sword of Beowulf appeared as if magically.

Museum . . . Collection . . . Director . . .

Sinbad knew where to go next.

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EIGHTEEN

Sinbad and Husayn travelled along the roads of Baghdad, it didn't look anything like what they had ever seen before.

'I think I am beginning to like this place except for the pirate battles,' Sinbad remarked.

Husayn nodded in agreement. The roads were wider and better built, the buildings were shinier, and the people wore elegant clothing. Hats, well-tailored coats and pants, shiny boots were commonplace, and people walked with an air of refinement. Newspaper boys shouted the daily news as passersby were given fresh fruit by vendors. The city was remarkably clean, with bridges and fountains that were a beautiful sight to behold. There was no sign of sand, darkness, or the desert of loneliness that they had become so accustomed to.

'We should change our clothes,' Sinbad suggested. 'We look out of place.'

'Yeah, but let's walk around. I want to know more about this world.' Husayn responded as they continued to explore. Soon they came across a public carnival that included a circus.

'There's a game here.' Husayn said, pointing to a booth. 'Looks interesting.' And he began to play.

'Can we go?' Sinbad asked impatiently.

'Yes, yes, of course. Just enjoying this.'

'Let's save the world instead. I'm sure that will be just as exciting,' Sinbad said sarcastically.

Husayn shrugged.

'What happened?' Sinbad asked.

‘I’ve reached a point where I feel like I’m done saving the world. Now I just wish to cherish the simple pleasures and embrace the smaller joys in life. You remember my oud, don’t you? I find myself longing for it intensely. I miss the enchanting melody that resonates when I strum the strings. I simply yearn to immerse myself in its music once more.”

‘Whatever happened to being a hero, following in your father’s footsteps?’ Sinbad asked.

Husayn raised his brows. ‘I want to do that too, but I’ve realized that maybe it’s not my calling. At least, not exclusively. I have done my share of heroism, and now I just want to lead a peaceful life, Sinbad. I have made my father proud, I think, and that’s enough for me.’

Sinbad could feel his friend’s emotions. He felt the same way, too. He couldn’t imagine how his life would look if it were calmer, but he knew he didn’t have the time to think about it.

‘Are you planning to leave after all of this is done?’ he asked.

‘Yeah,’ Husayn said. ‘Hope you don’t mind?’

‘Of course not.’ Sinbad replied. He had begun to realize he couldn’t control his friends’ decisions. ‘You have done more than enough by being on my side all this while, all of you, and that’s why I feel guilty about what happened with Anansi.’

‘I’m sure you had your reasons. I have a phobia of spiders, as you know,’ Husayn said.

Sinbad patted his friend’s back. *At least someone understood.*

The two continued to explore the carnival, which had different kinds of games, including those where you aimed and shot things mounted on walls, and others where you tossed a ring on the table and aimed for a prize. Peppy music filled the air, the smell of fried foods and dessert was persistent. There were stalls showcasing books about the city, and some writers were talking about their new pirate-themed books. Magazines were displayed on the racks, and they highlighted the battles and the achievements of the city. On it was written: THE PIRATE MENACE.

They also came across large statues, including one that caught Sinbad’s eye. It was one of the largest sculptures he had seen, right at the heart of the city. It depicted an old man with a beard fighting

a winged demon.

And on the mantelpiece, where everyone clicked pictures through a device, it was displayed in big letters:

'THE GRAND FINALE: SINBAD THE SAILOR'S ULTIMATE DUEL AGAINST THE DEVIL'

'You are a local hero here,' Husayn grinned, surprised at the statue. 'Almost a god-like figure. Look, there's more. Apparently, with this thing . . .' he began to press the buttons, and he scrolled down to read the history. 'So, in this world, Baghdad was indeed the way it was earlier in our realm, but after Sinbad defeated Iblis, he took over the Caliphate and paved the way for technology and magic to coexist. He also invented new things, built a new Baghdad, and shared that knowledge with other countries. Even helped re-build Qlitop, so everyone stayed content. The creatures apparently loved him too. Sinbad was soon given the title of Director of the State, which he held on to until his death. He lived a good life. Oh, and also . . . he got married.'

'To whom?' he asked, intrigued.

'Safeena,' Husayn grinned at Sinbad. 'Happy ending, then. They both died of natural causes . . .'

For a moment, it made a difference. A parallel world where there was a happy ending, where the good triumphed, and where his love remained.

His thoughts were interrupted by something that caught his eye. 'Is that the Sword of Beowulf?' He said looking at a sculpture of Sinbad that was holding a shiny, glistening weapon.

'Yes,' said Husayn reading the text. 'Apparently, the Sword of Beowulf is one of the artefacts the Sinbad of this world obtained during his voyages. He found it in Grendel's cave, and used it against Iblis, by stabbing him in the chest.'

'I see, that is great,' Sinbad said, sounding excited.

Sinbad noticed a newspaper boy distributing the papers, shouting a name, 'Julio Verne'.

'That's the name of the ship we were on,' Sinbad noticed, as he went to read the paper. But the boy asked for money first.

'Two silvers, please?' The boy was wearing a strange hat. 'Oh dear, you wear ancient clothes. Are you part of the theatre?'

‘Theatre?’

‘Yes, the lovely one happening today. It’s right there, isn’t it?’ he signalled at the caravans, where there were more people, all dressed like Sinbad. ‘So, you’re also performing the Ballad of Sinbad? The early voyages when he battled the Kraken? Fascinating stuff.’

‘Ah . . .’ Sinbad was almost jealous of his alternate self for being so accomplished. ‘Um . . . I just want to know about Julio Verne, if that’s all right.’

‘It isn’t all right. A boy needs to make some penny, you see.’ He said this, pausing. ‘Given your affiliation with the theatre group, I will oblige. Julio Verne, a notorious figure, is known for his dark reputation as a thief, pirate, and deranged robber. He was once a respected businessman, dealing in spices and enjoying a prominent position in social circles. Surprisingly, he even had close ties with the Order, the city’s governing authority, and supported their explorations. However, when his true nature was exposed, everything unravelled. He fell from grace, and now resides in an enigmatic underwater city, its location shrouded in secrecy. His band of followers continues to wreak havoc, perpetrating thefts and launching sporadic attacks on the city before vanishing into the shadows. The absence of the director, who was once capable of safeguarding the city, is deeply felt by the populace.’

‘I’m sure. This Order, though . . . who are they?’

‘Selectively chosen by the director himself,’ the boy said. ‘A group of nine individuals who run different affairs of the state. They do an okay job. The taxes are lower and the corruption is too, except for this Julio Verne business. In fact, they were the ones who launched the director’s collection which holds the amazing Sword of Beowulf. Are you both new here?’

Husayn nodded, ‘Yes, travelled from far.’

‘How far?’

‘You don’t want to know, kid,’ Sinbad said, realizing that the Order might take back the sword if he tried taking it from this world. Sinbad will need to explain his situation pretty well, so that everything would become all right. But he had to ask for permission from the Order. ‘How do I get an appointment to meet the Order? And who should I meet?’

‘Appointment, you say? That’s tough. But you can see them opening the wonderful museum. They are quite busy all the time, you see.’ The boy chuckled under his breath. ‘But the one person you should keep an eye on is Governor Ishmael. He’s the man for foreign affairs, if foreign is where you are from.’ He showed a picture of a lanky, bony man, with slick, oiled hair and furry brows.

‘So Governor Ishmael is the leader of the Order?’ Sinbad asked, taking mental notes, but he couldn’t register anything beyond this point as the newspaper boy interrupted with startling news. ‘Yes. And he’s Sinbad’s son.’

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NINETEEN

Sinbad had stolen some clothes from a theatre troupe before heading to the grand opening of the museum, where the sword would be on display.

'Do you ever think of retiring?' Husayn asked.

'Not really,' Sinbad replied. I don't know what I would do if I retired. Plus, I'm too young to even think of retiring.'

'I don't think age has anything to do with it. You know, I think about my father and how he was a hero, how he had a responsibility to fight the enemy. But on the other side, he also had a responsibility to his family. I want to live so that I can find a girl, get married, have lots of children and play my music in taverns. It's what would make me happy.'

'Retirement is scary, and you talking about it is making it worse.' Sinbad sighed.

As they approached the museum, they heard a small flute-playing band and saw a large crowd gathered outside. Promotions were in full swing, with banners and posters on display and money being asked for outside the museum.

Sinbad decided to steal someone's wallet in order to get in.

'Did we do right by stealing?' Husayn asked.

'We are just borrowing it. We'll give it back before we leave,' Sinbad replied defensively.

'Says every thief ever, but anyway,' Husayn rolled his eyes.

They paid for their tickets and entered the massive, colosseum-like building that was well-lit. Inside, people were checking out the displayed artefacts, and Sinbad and Husayn began their search for

the sword.

'This Sinbad, let's call him the Sinbad the Second. He's had quite lot of adventures,' said Husayn. 'Oh look, an eye of a troll.' They proceeded to read how Sinbad had stolen the troll's eye when it was asleep. 'And there are the legs of Hermes which he used and was said to have given him great speed and agility, and the wings of Icarus. He even had the head of a roc!'

Sinbad's encounter with the roc during his adventure with his master was not something worthy of being displayed in a museum. The roc had caused a lot of chaos and destruction, but they were fortunate enough to have Safeena on their side, who helped them defeat it.

While checking the artefacts, Sinbad noticed something. 'There's no mention of seids or the guild. It's like they don't exist at all . . .'

'Probably why Sinbad the Second achieved most of these things?'

'I never thought I'd be such a hero, that too right in the first realm I entered,' Sinbad clenched his teeth. 'It puts a lot of pressure, especially on someone who's constantly losing.'

'Come on, man, you don't lose. You just go astray.'

'Thanks for the pep talk, Husayn.'

'I try, but clearly I'm not good at it.'

'You know what? Maybe I'll retire too, away from the nonsense of saving this and that. This is my last try.' Sinbad said.

Husayn didn't respond to that.

Soon they reached the centre of the museum, where most crowd was gathered, all looking in awe of what was in the middle. There was security, but not enough, Sinbad noticed.

Just then, a familiar, lanky figure appeared in the middle. Governor Ishmael.

'Your son,' whispered Husayn.

'He's not *my* son. He's the son of the alternate parallel version of me.'

'Technically, he's still your son, isn't he?'

'He's older than me.'

'Potato-potato,' Husayn replied.

'I don't think you said that correctly. You have to pronounce it differently.'

‘Oh, I see . . .’

Governor Ishmael, dressed in a black tailcoat and pants with knee-length boots, clapped his hands and announced, ‘Hello everyone!’ He stood in front of a rectangular glass box that housed the Sword of Beowulf. ‘I am pleased to finally unveil this majestic weapon, the prophetic blade, for public viewing. For years, it has been a tale of murmurs, but now it’s no longer a rumor. It is here before us! What a lovely sight, isn’t it?’

The audience erupted in applause.

‘The Sword of Beowulf once belonged to a Germanic heir,’ Ishmael continued. ‘It was then found by my father, the great Sinbad, during an accidental voyage. He happened to be in a cave where he battled the spirit of Grendel’s mother. Grendel, as we know, was a feared monster. Once the spirit was defeated, my father took the blade from the trove and won the day. What an important day it was! Father never thought getting this blade would lead him to save the world one day . . . The sword is made from the jotunn blood that is believed to have many supernatural powers, and the hilt, which is very peculiar as you can see, is made of moonstone.’

The hilt was white, almost ivory, with ruby and sapphire signet gems.

‘I never had the pleasure of knowing my father,’ Ishmael continued, his voice tinged with sadness. ‘I was quite young when he passed away along with my mother, but he left me a note on how to proceed with the state that he had created. He was a strict man, from what I remember about him, which isn’t much, but I will always look up to him as my hero.’

Sinbad was left speechless and unsure of how to feel upon hearing all this. He couldn’t predict if his own world’s future would turn out the same way. However, he didn’t have the luxury of dwelling on these thoughts at the moment. He had to obtain the sword somehow, and he didn’t know how to do it without stealing it. There were too many people around. He had to find a way to talk to Ishmael. *If he would understand and agree to loan Sinbad the sword, just for the time being, then our world could be saved.*

‘We had been keeping it inside the Order’s vault, but we took a

unanimous call to display it for the public. And now you all can witness the grand event . . .'

Before Ishmael could finish his sentence, a loud explosion shook the building. One part of the ceiling tore down, and with a large amount of force, debris rained down on everyone.

Sinbad and Husayn crouched down as people screamed and stampeded in panic.

Governor Ishmael was transfixed, standing in the midst of the chaos, unable to comprehend what was happening. Just then, Sinbad saw that a part of the roof was going to collapse on Ishmael. He sprinted towards him and slammed into Ishmael's shoulder, pushing him out of the way just as the roof fell down. Ishmael fell to the ground and looked at Sinbad as if he knew him. Just then, the automatons that Sinbad had seen fighting the pirates earlier came running towards them.

Ishmael's bodyguards quickly ran to him and escorted him out while the others were shooting crossbows and bullets at the supposed assailant who had caused the explosion. Sinbad was pushed behind as just another civilian in the path.

A hot air balloon floated down from the broken ceiling. It had a metal armour around it that deflected the bullets. Sitting inside was a man wearing a top hat, twirling his moustache. He was small in frame and wore a purple coat on top of a turtleneck.

'Apologies for bringing myself here, but I wanted to avoid waiting any further,' he said.

The security kept shooting, but to no avail.

'I would call this my bullet repellent. It is made from the mines of dwarves combined with modern technology. Very interesting, isn't it?' He laughed manically and before reaching the ground and hanging from the opening in the balloon, he punched his way through the transparent glass of the Sword of Beowulf.

Sinbad started chasing the hot air balloon to get closer to the man. Sinbad even read the words written on the hot air balloon, 'PROPERTY OF JULIO VERNE,' but the man with the twirling moustache noticed Sinbad chasing him.

Sinbad couldn't do much, as the deflective shield just threw him of, and he was shoved back.

‘A brave man, indeed. Clap for him, please.’

The museum was still chaotic, with people running around, looking for their loved ones while trying to escape. The stampede didn’t care about Sinbad or the man in the balloon, and the bodyguards’ bullets couldn’t stop the man either, who was clearly Julio Verne by the looks of it and from the newspaper Sinbad had seen. He grabbed hold of the sword, and sitting inside his balloon, floated up again.

Sinbad and Husayn cursed under their breath when he did what they feared he would do.

‘He’s running away,’ said Husayn.

‘I know. The shield is too strong, but I can do one thing.’ He said while watching the balloon fly away.

Sinbad quickly murmured a spell he had learnt in the guild and began to carve it in the air. He swept it towards the hot air balloon. It was a tracking spell, a simple one; even a human who has nothing to do with the guild could learn it if they knew the basics.

And as the hot air balloon vanished from sight, Sinbad was left with the bitter realization that the Sword of Beowulf, the very reason for his journey, had been snatched away by an all-too-predictable, eccentric villain who revelled in twirling his moustache.

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TWENTY

‘Everything is all right,’ shouted the announcer. ‘The Sword of Beowulf shall be restored after we apprehend the enemy, the thief.’

However, the people were outraged and had gathered, after the entire fiasco, in front of the stage with placards, spewing curses.

‘I know, I know, we are in quite a mess. I can understand you all must be really angry, but as you see, Julio Verne doesn’t leave a trace behind,’ the announcer said.

Sinbad raised his brows and looked over at the broken down museum. *Yeah, no trace at all.*

‘The security was shite,’ someone yelled.

‘We need a refund!’

‘The sword belongs to the state. Not to a thief.’

‘IF THE DIRECTOR WOULD HAVE BEEN HERE, THINGS WOULDN’T HAVE BEEN THIS CRAZY!’

‘This is madness,’ said a man with flowing hair who was standing next to Sinbad. For a moment, Sinbad thought it was directed towards what had happened with Julio Verne, but it was towards Sinbad.

‘I agree,’ Sinbad smiled as he saw the man, who wore very posh clothes and was a handsome chap. ‘You seem like someone who’s not from this time.’

‘And you look like someone who’s not from this space,’ the man chuckled.

‘I am the Traveller and you?’

‘Sinbad.’

‘Oh, like the Director? Interesting name.’

‘Yours too.’

‘After you travel for so long, my friend, you lose your identity,’ he winked. ‘I must go to my machine now. Time is of the essence after all.’

Identity lost?

Sinbad hadn’t had the time to reflect. As the Traveller left, Sinbad began to contemplate; he realized that he had lost many parts of himself during his adventures, such as becoming spiteful, a liar, a hustler, he had become way more anxious, and selfish than he could imagine. He knew that these traits were not in line with his parallel self, the Director.

Sinbad and Husayn tried to escape the crowd and make way towards the corner when he saw the governor, who was standing with his security, listening to the announcements. Hearing the crowd’s uproar, the governor made his way towards his carriage and sat down, deciding to leave.

‘We need to follow him.’ Sinbad said. ‘I need to talk to the governor.’

‘You mean your son?’

‘That will never stop being a joke, right?’ Sinbad raised his brows.

‘Oh yes. Are you sure you want to talk to your son?’

‘Very much so.’

‘What do you want to do?’

Sinbad saw the carriages passing through the main roads where the fair was.

‘You distract them. Take a shortcut and stop them in the middle. I’ll go upstairs to the roof.’

‘Shortcut? What do you think I am? I entered this realm the moment you did. I know as much as . . .’

Sinbad quickly darted towards the nearest building, nimbly ascending the stairs and leaping from rooftop to rooftop, his movements fluid and graceful. He wore a short coat that flapped in the wind behind him and a bow slung over his shoulder. A bowler hat perched on his head, casting a shadow over his sharp features. From his vantage point, he could see the carriage careening down the street below. With a determined glint in his eye, Sinbad somersaulted through the air and slid along the edge of the roof,

propelling himself in the direction of the carriage.

He saw Husayn come out of nowhere and land right in front of the carriages as he fell down on the ground. He held his knee and shouted in pain.

'What drama!' Sinbad said, grinning, as he saw an opportunity. It was a rope that was tied from the building he stood on to the opposite building. He took off his coat and hooked it on the rope as he zipped across the building, looking down as he aimed it right. As soon as he realized he was atop the carriage, he relinquished control. For a fleeting moment, he hung mid-air, weightless and free. Then, with a thunderous impact, he collided with the carriage, narrowly evading security. Ishmael's heart raced with fear, for it marked the second intrusion he had faced in a matter of hours.

'What is going on?' he shouted.

'Governor, I am sorry to barge in like this, but I needed to get your attention.'

'Who the hell are you?'

'The one who saved you.'

The governor looked at Sinbad's face and narrowed his gaze. 'Ah, that boy.'

'Yes. All I want to say is that . . . I know how to track Julio Verne.'

By then, security had rushed in and began to rough up Sinbad, pulling him out of the carriage and throwing him on to the road. Husayn had, by then, come to rescue Sinbad, but he too was pushed down.

The governor emerged from the carriage, wearing a frustrated grimace. 'I have a feeling you won't let go of me till you talk to me. You seem to be the sort.'

Meanwhile, the other governors emerged from their carriages, intrigued by the commotion.

'How did you know?' Sinbad asked.

'Because my father was too, and you resemble him a bit. Less stern, of course,' replied the governor.

'Listen to me once and I'm sure I'll make it worth your while. The stories I have, where I come from, you would want to know.'

The governor nodded. 'Bring them to my office and get them new

clothes for the love of the Director.'

And with that, he left in his carriage.

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TWENTY-ONE

‘So you are saying you are my father?’ Ishmael thumped his fist on the table.

Sinbad and Husayn were at Ishmael’s office. They had been given fresh clothes. The guards, who were automatons, stood behind them, ready to pounce if he said anything wrong.

‘Well, not technically. But yes, I am also Sinbad,’ Sinbad replied.

‘And you have no proof to substantiate that?’ Ishmael said. ‘No identity card, no kind of . . .’

‘Well, in our defence, we are just sailors and don’t have what you call identity cards,’ Sinbad explained.

Ishmael narrowed his eyes, as if he couldn’t believe the incredulous points the boy was making as he sat down on the chair. His office was filled with books, globes, parchments and quills. There was a window that let the sunlight in. ‘You are making your claims quite high, if it weren’t for you saving my life, I wouldn’t even bother to hear all of this.’

‘I know it’s weird, but in our world, Iblis has risen, and we need the Sword of Beowulf . . . We kind of need to borrow it. I was thinking of asking you earlier, but Julio Verne decided to spoil my plans . . . ’

Ishmael licked his lips. Upon closer inspection, Sinbad realized that they looked very similar.

He had bulgy eyes, and his lips were papery, but he looked very nervous, as if he had something to hide.

‘And what makes you think we will give you the sword?’

‘That’s what your father would have done. He would have helped

others.'

'What do you know about my father?'

'Um . . . I am . . . your father. I just told you,' Sinbad replied.

Husayn couldn't help it. He let out a quick giggle.

'I'm sure you look like him, but you aren't anything like him. The man was a tyrant.'

'I'm sure that isn't the truth,' Sinbad said, reflecting on how his crew sometimes perceives him incorrectly.

'Oh no, he was. High expectations. High volatility. When he grew older, he became a menace. He always had high standards from everyone around him.' his eyes glazed over with memories as he continued. 'Even his son, who was too young to know what standards are. One mistake, and you would be reprimanded.'

Sinbad noticed a picture of the Director behind the chair. The man had sharp features, a well-groomed beard, and intense eyes, projecting an air of authority. Sinbad never expected himself to be anything like that—so stern and yet uncompromising. It reminded him of Master Reis, for some reason.

'You spoke so highly of your father at the museum,' Husayn said, reminding him.

'That's what the public wants, isn't it?' Ishmael licked his lips. 'I was always under pressure to do great and I never got a thank you, or a compliment even. For him, it was always work. You know, at the funeral, when he died, you know what he left me in the will? I was expecting a letter, probably parting words. Maybe an "I love you", but all I got was numbers. Numbers of the accounts, numbers of what was kept in which bank, and a list of names of the people I could trust. There was nothing that was personal. There was no message to his "son", but only to his "successor". Is that what a father does?'

Sinbad sighed. He wanted to hug his son from the parallel universe. But he was a parallel version of his posterity, and he had to keep his distance.

'Anyway, what am I mumbling about?' Ishmael shrugged his shoulders. 'You said something about tracking Julio Verne. The other governors had heard you when you claimed it on the streets, and now they are after me. So tell me all you know.'

‘Do you have a compass?’

Ishmael opened the drawers and presented it to him. ‘Here.’

Sinbad flicked his fingers, and the same green spark released from his finger. He put it across in the compass. ‘Now it is equipped with the location of Julio Verne.’

For a moment, Ishmael just kept watching him. ‘What the hell was that? Are you a wizard?’

‘Well, in a way, yes. I come from a guild of seid-mages, and I have been trained to use certain techniques like that. It’s a form of magic, you could say,’ Sinbad explained, hoping to dispel any misconceptions about his abilities.

‘I see,’ Ishmael replied, still in shock.

He picked up the compass and examined it. The arrow pointed towards the east. ‘The east is where the ocean is.’

‘I have a feeling, it’s going to lead us underwater,’ said Sinbad, recalling his training in the seid and guild.

‘So, the underwater city is real?’ Ishmael raised his eyebrows skeptically. ‘How do I know that you are not lying? That this isn’t just another trap by Julio Verne?’

‘If it was, it’s a very poorly drawn-out trap because you have us here, right in front of you, surrounded by your guards,’ Sinbad replied.

Ishmael grinned. ‘Smart answer. Prepare the sub.’ He told the automatons, who nodded and began to leave. ‘We are going to turbo this.’

‘Sub?’ Husayn asked, confused.

‘Submarine, to take us under water.’ Ishmael replied.

Sinbad felt a shiver run down his spine at the thought of being submerged in water. He wanted to ask what a submarine was but kept silent, not wanting to appear ignorant.

‘Now, I don’t want to just entertain you all, but the public is going mad as expected. They will want to see their hero’s sword back in the museum. I believe we should follow every lead. But in this one, I’ll go myself and not let any general or commander screw it up. Once we reach there, I’ll update you.’

‘Oh no, no. We are going too,’ Sinbad insisted. ‘We can be of help.’

‘How do you think you’ll be of any help?’ Ishmael asked, amused.

‘I’m Sinbad,’ he said confidently. ‘Don’t forget, my parallel version is the one who saved this world, so you need me.’

Ishmael rolled his eyes. ‘Fine, come along then. I have a feeling I’m going to remember this trip.’

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TWENTY-TWO

Sinbad had never been on a submarine. What little he understood was that it was an underwater ship. That was fascinating in itself, for now, he had travelled in air. He had travelled on ocean, the only thing left . . . was this.

He remained transfixed by the mesmerizing sight beyond his small underwater window—the vibrant coral reefs, graceful fish, and an array of creatures of all sizes. The sound of rushing water filled his ears, creating a symphony of aquatic life. Sinbad's hand brushed against the cold, iron surface of the submarine's construction machine. As he examined it closely, he discovered that it consisted of multiple compartments, reminiscent of a ship's layout.

Just like a ship, there were distinct areas within the submarine—a bustling cargo dock, a diving compartment, a holding area, and the captain's quarters. The common dock served as a central hub, frequently bustling with activity, while the narrow corridors connected different sections. Despite the confined space and an underlying sense of claustrophobia, the experience remained utterly unique and captivating. Husayn was watching the underwater world too, while Ishmael was using the compass to guide himself, looking out for any incoming danger in the water. The submarine had weapons too—missiles, as Ishmael had mentioned, torpedoes and whatnot. But they were all in front.

'He's too deep in the ocean,' Ishmael remarked. 'That is, if your tracking spell works.'

'It does; don't worry,' Sinbad said, pausing, 'You were not close to

your father, were you?'

Ishmael raised his brows as he pulled back from the viewfinder. 'He was a warrior, a voyager and an adventurer. I was born with low bone density as a kid. This made him angry. He felt betrayed. He wanted an adventurer like himself for a son, so you can imagine the conversations in the house.'

'I'm sorry,' Sinbad said. 'I am sorry, kid. I'm sorry if I was such a jerk to my own son. You are handling it pretty well, whatever you are doing, and I'm sure he'll be proud of you.'

Ishmael smiled. 'It's good to hear that from someone who claims to be my father in a parallel universe.'

'How was your mother?' Sinbad couldn't resist asking. He was dying to know what the Safeena of this world was like.

'She was a kind woman,' he smiled. 'She was a princess of an island, a tribe that my father had chanced upon. They got married soon after he defeated the tyrannical island king.'

'Ah, so she wasn't the devil's daughter in this world? Only my life is complicated, I see,' Sinbad mumbled to himself.

Husayn coughed, 'Was there a friend of your father's? Probably goes by the name of Husayn?'

'Of course, though here he was pronounced as Hussein.' Ishmael said with a smile. 'Uncle Hussein to me.'

'Where is he? What is he doing?' he asked curiously.

'Oh, he's the one who leads the Order,' Ishmael said. 'He's the one reason basically why everything is stabilized in the city. I'm just a kid who's been put here thanks to nepotism.'

'He doesn't retire?'

'My uncle? Oh no. He wanted to follow his father's legacy of helping the country till he died, and that is what he is doing. He's too old now, yet he does most of the work, following the legacy.'

Husayn was taken aback. He had been talking about retirement and here, his parallel self, who had the same issues with his father, had taken a different route.

Sinbad was about to ask another question when he was interrupted.

'I see something! It is a fortress,' Ishmael exclaimed, pointing towards a massive structure built from shells and corals. Despite

being constructed from natural materials, the fortress had an elegance and sophistication that surpassed any building on land. It was a true marvel of architecture.

Before anyone could respond, something hit their window. Sinbad instantly looked outside and it took a while for his eyes to adjust, then he found a tentacle rising and smacking the screen of the window. Sinbad pulled back.

'That's a squid!' Sinbad exclaimed.

'Not just any squid, a brutal-looking squid,' Husayn added, his words causing Sinbad and himself to exchange horrified expressions. In contrast, Ishmael stood calmly, as if he had everything under control.

'Ah, they must be made of machines,' Ishmael said. 'Attack-stations everyone!' He ordered the automatons. 'Shoot the torpedoes.'

The missiles launched, but the squid deftly wrapped its tentacles around the submarine, rendering them helpless.

'We cannot move.'

All the screens went into red alert.

'And it's pressing the interiors,' Ishmael said.

Sinbad looked at the scuba suit which had a large helmet with a glass window for seeing and iron grilled openings for breathing. 'Can I wear that and go out?'

'Of course, you can, but that is too dangerous,' Ishmael warned.

Sinbad didn't think twice and began wearing the suit. He fastened the helmet last and took the spear that came with it. 'I know how to swim.'

He opened the lever and escaped outside without listening to the people behind him as Husayn and Ishmael tried to figure out the situation inside. Sinbad swam up and realized he could breathe properly underwater with the suit. He swam towards the squid, which was large and dark, but had lifeless eyes, it was as if it was controlled by something.

Sinbad thrust the spear towards the squid, but it deflected the spear with ease. Sinbad shoved it again, plunging it into one of the tentacles and breaking it apart. Another tentacle appeared and smacked him, wrapping his entire body tightly in its embrace.

Sinbad broke out of it and moved towards the squid's head, where he managed to stab it in the eye. The squid squirted black liquid that hit Sinbad's glove. It began to disintegrate his suit, and he felt the cold water seep in.

Sinbad realized that if the water level reached his head, he would be in serious trouble and could suffocate. As another tentacle appeared, it grabbed the spear and pulled it out of his hand. Panic set in as the water rose to his neck and he struggled to control his suit. His heart raced with fear, realizing that he could die if he didn't act quickly.

Come on . . . Come on . . .

Sinbad kicked the squid's stabbed eye, and he saw a torpedo appear from the submarine. The squid had been hit by the torpedo, and debris hit Sinbad as he swam back to the submarine, closing the door behind him.

Water had filled up the inside of the suit, and Sinbad struggled to breathe as he took off his helmet and fell to the ground, panting heavily.

It's done.

It's done.

Another torpedo went off, breaking apart the gates of the fortress, which had a landing base for other submarines. The submarine entered through the gates.

'We are in,' Ishmael said. 'It's showtime.'

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TWENTY-THREE

Sinbad entered the fortress, with Ishmael and Husayn following him cautiously in the corridor. Ishmael's automatons marched along with them, wielding their sabres and rifles.

The corridor led to another one, and they hurriedly moved forward.

'What is the story of Julio Verne?' asked Husayn.

'A Spanish conquistador,' said Ishmael. 'He came from a small town and was sent by the royalty to create friendly relations with Baghdad. He settled here and eventually became good friends with the Order. He was a pretty good man, so to speak. No problems. But then he showed signs of being a sociopath. He slowly became the richest man in the city and started doing a lot of philanthropy.'

'So how did he become a thief?' asked Sinbad.

'I think he was always one. The idea was to get close to the Order. He was also a great inventor of sorts,' Ishmael explained. 'He loved creating new things, and most of the technology infusion in Baghdad is because of him and his company. He became close to people who began to trust and respect him, it was then that he showed his true intentions.'

Sinbad couldn't fathom how someone could change overnight.

'The Order caught on to his lies too,' Ishmael went on, 'We learned that he was an escaped convict from Spain and was not an emissary as he said he was. In fact, he was on the run and wanted to find asylum. But it was too late to do anything. By then, he had garnered enough power. We confronted him, but he escaped. Apparently, he really admired father too, though he could never

meet him.'

As they turned into the corner, another corridor opened, revealing pictures, illustrations, and figurines of the Director.

'Fan of the Director . . .' Sinbad mumbled in awe. 'A villain who worships a hero. Interesting.'

'Yes,' Ishmael agreed.

'Is that why he stole the sword?' Sinbad asked.

'Probably,' Ishmael shrugged. 'He always had an eye on it, after all. When we tried to confront him, he escaped. After that, he did everything to ruin the Order. Stole the city's treasure and items of importance, broke into banks, destroyed places and created carnage. We tried to find him and stop him, but he proved to be too smart. He's come up with multiple inventions to fight us and now he has a pirate crew that flies around battling our men. It's a menace.'

As they entered the final corridor, it opened up into a large hall filled with all kinds of so-called inventions. Sinbad saw that there was a large window overlooking the sea, where one could see sharks, fish, and octopuses floating about.

'I think we are at the nerve centre,' Sinbad said. 'This is where he operates from.'

There were plans, blueprints, and a whole lot of other interesting stuff. When the door closed behind them, most of the automatons that had been trailing them were left behind in the other room.

'Welcome, welcome to my humble domain. How was the giant squid? Did you have fun battling it?' Julio emerged from the shadows on the other end as Sinbad raised his sword.

He turned to find the voice it, coming from the shadows at the other end.

'You are the kid who tried to stop me,' Julio said twirling his moustache. 'I remember you, boy.'

Sinbad waited for the big evil speech, but instead he got a revelation.

'Though I am quite disappointed with a certain someone. Governor? I thought we had a deal.'

Sinbad and Husayn turned back to Ishmael. 'What does he mean?'

'Oh, have you not told them?' Julio laughed. 'After all, he's the

reason I was able to steal the Sword of Beowulf,' he said, holding the sword with a grin, 'so very easily.'

*

Ishmael remained stoic.

'What is he saying?' Sinbad asked him.

'Let me tell you a story. It will explain everything,' said Julio. 'It is more like an anecdote. My time at the Order was over as my lies were exposed. Then, I realized that my dear Ishmael has a little gambling problem and was in huge debt.' Julio laughed. 'Now here's the thing. It was me who orchestrated the events in the first place that led to those debts by putting him in that situation. Once he was under my mercy, he was very understanding about my issues. He agreed to do my bidding. I told him—as long as he lets me steal the Sword of Beowulf and run amok, I wouldn't reveal his secrets. He agreed, and now they wouldn't know that the hero they worship, his son, is a cheat and a gambler who has no control.

Ishmael apologized, looking down, red-faced, and said, 'I should have told you this before, but I was ashamed and helpless.' He looked sad and disappointed, but suddenly looked up and said, 'But . . . But . . . it's over, Julio. I don't care about those debts anymore,' he said, suddenly looking up. 'Speaking to these young gentlemen made me realize it's better to own up to your mistakes than to live a life as a crooked man.'

Julio applauded Ishmael and said, 'Bravo, my friend. What an honourable thing to say! We all make mistakes. But we always redeem ourselves, don't we?'

'Shut up. Tell us why you want the sword.' Husayn interrupted and asked Julio.

Julio replied, 'Ah, well, it's something fun, that's all. You know why a thief steals? Not just for the riches, at least not me. I do it for the thrill. A big fan of the Director, I wanted to feel what he felt when he killed the devil. And now I do.' He said smiling at the sword. 'And now, since I'm done with it,' He threw it down. 'You can take it.'

'You are coming with us,' Ishmael said.

‘Sure. Why not?’

Sinbad attempted to pick up the sword when suddenly a large claw came out of nowhere and struck him, sending him crashing into the other side of the room. Sinbad saw a mechanical crab-like vehicle with large claws made of wires and machines, and Julio jumped inside and began operating it.

‘I had a feeling this wasn’t going to be easy,’ Sinbad growled. ‘Husayn, go for the sword.’

The crab’s claws lunged forward immediately, but Sinbad managed to deflect it with his sword. Suddenly, there was a thud against the sealed window as the shark, agitated by the fight, began slamming its head against it. Another claw came at Sinbad, prompting him to roll forward and stab it from beneath. Julio skillfully operated the crab machine, allowing it to leap from one place to another whenever Sinbad tried to attack it. ‘Ah, damn it,’ muttered Sinbad as he dodged the crab’s claw and leaped towards the glass window from which Julio’s face could be seen. Sinbad tried to punch it, but the glass window was too strong. Suddenly, one of the claws grabbed his shirt and flung him across the room, crashing into the wall and ceiling.

‘Oh freak!’ Sinbad coughed as he struggled to get up, the crab advanced towards him, ready for a massive battle. Seeing this, Husayn rushed to Sinbad’s side to help.

Ishmael on the oter hand stormed towards the crab, he almost leapt from position. He managed to grab the Sword of Beowulf and break the transparent glass through which they could see Julio. Ishmael stabbed Julio in the chest, killing him when he saw the claw was about to throw him against the glass window.

The crab machine began to disintegrate and fall apart and Julio struggled to breathe before passing out. Sinbad rushed to Ishmael, who was trembling due to his low bone density, struggling to move properly.

Sinbad grabbed Ishmael’s face and asked. ‘Are you okay? You didn’t have to do that.’

‘I had to,’ Ishmael replied, shivering. ‘I needed to redeem myself. You need to leave. The glass is breaking, you can’t afford to die.’

‘You can’t either!’ Sinbad exclaimed.

‘I won’t.’ Ishmael said, showing a small device that was blinking red. ‘I have pressed the distress button. They’ll be coming for me.’ He paused, breathing heavily. ‘I have never undertaken such physical strain in my life. Running and jumping like that . . . it was exhilarating. But I guess I’ll never walk again.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ Sinbad said sympathetically, noticing the strain on Ishmael’s face. ‘But you still did what needed to be done. You’re a hero, Ishmael, and nothing can change that.’

‘I’m sure your father would be proud of you,’ Sinbad said with a chuckle, ‘You saved our lives. And from what I have seen in my world and yours, I respect those who put themselves before others. I wish you hadn’t though, you look weak.’

Ishmael shook his head. ‘You’re wrong. I didn’t do it for my father. I did it because I felt it was right. I have always known what was right but never had the strength to act on it. But this time I did, and I don’t regret it one bit,’ he said, taking a deep breath.

Sinbad observed the tense lines and wrinkles etched on Ishmael’s face.

Ishmael continued, ‘I shouldn’t have let Julio steal the sword. I was just afraid when I was in his debt, he could ruin me. But after he tried to kill you today right, in front of me, I felt I needed to right my wrongs.’

Sinbad smiled, ‘You did well. We all make mistakes, but if we come around, we still have a chance for the sake of humanity.’

Ishmael smiled back, ‘You should take the sword and go now. You need it more than a stupid museum. Go, fight the devil.’

‘I’ll return it to you.’

‘I’m sure you will . . . Sinbad.’

Acknowledging him by name meant a lot to Sinbad, he felt a sense of pride that someone like Ishmael recognized him as a person, not just a hero or captain. It made him feel seen and appreciated for who he was. He wanted to wait till the rescue boats came, but something told him that Ishmael would be safe. He walked up to Husayn, who was still in shock. Holding his hand, he took out the red sphere and pressed the button. On cue, a tunnel opened and they were no longer a part of the underwater world.

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TWENTY-FOUR

Sinbad tossed the Sword of Beowulf on to the table.

The entire crew was gathered in the captain's lodge, except for Markus.

'Okay, I shouldn't have kept secrets from all of you. I should have been more transparent about the deal that I had to make and been more considerate about how it affected each of you,' Sinbad admitted, picking up the sword again. 'I thought I was doing the right thing. But I wasn't. I did more harm than good. But, for now, we have got it.'

They all smiled, except for Pressa, who remained concerned.

'I just hope my visions are clear. We still don't know what to do with the sword,' she said rubbing her shoulder.

'Probably stab the devil with it?' Ashrafiyah suggested, raising her eyebrows. 'I'm sure that's the point of any sword, right?' she added with a smirk.

'Let's not be smartasses here,' Idris interjected. 'It could be used for a ritual, for all we know.'

Emir nodded. 'That's true. We've also spotted a tailing ship. They've been following us for some time now . . . and I happened to notice.' He proudly announced. 'I have informed the first in command,' he signalled at Idris, 'and I believe our course of action is to identify them.'

'Yes, I gave him the task of monitoring our safety,' Idris replied, smiling back proudly.

'Another ship?' Sinbad raised his brows. 'How far?'

'Five hundred paces away from us. They are making sure they are

in the fog, hidden.' Ashrafiyah added. 'Makes one wonder who they are, doesn't it, my love?'

'We should find out,' Sinbad said. 'Why don't you turn yourself into a bird and take a look?'

Ashrafiyah grunted. 'I am a vampire. My job is to drink blood and have a good time. And here, you treat me like a common witch. I say we confront them and battle it out.'

'No bloodshed yet. We need to identify the threat first,' Sinbad said, rolling his eyes.

'Could it be a threat?' Pressa asked, concerned. 'Because if it is, why haven't they attacked us till now?'

'That's what I'm wondering too,' Sinbad agreed.

'Could it be one of Iblis's ships? Maybe he's keeping track of you?' Husayn suggested.

'Iblis is hiding somewhere, preparing for his hunt, as he says. It can't be him.'

'What did you just say?' Ashrafiyah asked, shocked.

Idris arched her brows. 'How do you know he's hiding?'

'Have you been chatting with the devil?' Pressa yelled.

'Erm,' Sinbad scratched the back of his head. Soon, he opened up about his conversations with Iblis. They all listened intently. Ashrafiyah, especially, was quiet, exceptionally so, as if she had heard death's calling.

By the end of the conversation, they all looked confused. But Ashrafiyah rushed out of the lodge.

'What happened to her?' asked Emir.

After what seemed like a long minute, she stormed back in with a book and opened it to a page, which was covered with illustrations. It showed a few horsemen, all green in colour, riding through the sky, leaving behind bones and flesh.

'The wild hunt is not just a wild hunt. It is *the* wild hunt,' Ashrafiyah said. 'We used to learn about wild hunts in witchcraft at the school. Later this topic was banned because it was considered to bring in ideas of mass extermination. The seers have predicted that the wild hunt is one of the many outcomes of the world ending.'

'But what is it?' Husayn asked. 'Just a bunch of people flying in the air?'

‘More than that. All the evil in every myth we know comes together and rides on their horses. Whoever sees them dies on the spot. It’s instant death, basically massive human extermination.’

Idris shook her head. ‘Iblis was being cheeky with you. He tricked you.’

Sinbad thumped his fist. ‘Now I get it. Cronus, Loki, Apep, they are the evil deities of every myth out there. So that’s what he’s planning to do. He wants to bring the wild hunt together and ride through our world,’ Sinbad continued.

‘Iblis doesn’t want to destroy this world. He loves it. He just wants to get rid of the humans.’

‘How does riding together on flying horses end the world? Like what’s the logic?’ asked Husayn confused.

‘Imagine a bunch of devils from every myth, every religion, from all over the world coming together to create one true evil. Imagine what might happen,’ Idris explained to Husayn.

Sinbad glanced at his friend. ‘Ashrafiyah, I believe it is time for you to fly to that ship and find out who has been tracking us.’

‘Aye aye, Captain,’ she said and left.

Soon everyone had left, except Idris, who turned to Sinbad and whispered. ‘Thank you, Sinbad,’ she whispered, tears in her eyes. ‘For getting Emir back.’

Sinbad was glad he did something right.

But it was time to make it right with someone else as well.

He smiled at her and wished her goodnight before heading to the deck, where he saw Markus, the giant African, watching the seas ahead with the wind blowing through his brows.

Sinbad stood next to him, ‘I’m sorry.’

Markus didn’t acknowledge him.

‘I genuinely mean it,’ Sinbad continued. ‘During this trip, I’ve come to realize that people can make mistakes, but they need to know how to correct them.’ He remembered Ishmael. Sinbad was worried for him. This was a feeling he wasn’t familiar with. It was almost paternal. Surprisingly, Sinbad wanted to go back and check on the man, but he had no sphere to do so. He only had one chance in each world.

Markus began to speak. ‘When I captured Anansi, he made a vow

to kill my daughter, Mawu, for whom I fight every day, even now, against the creatures of the dark. Mawu lives in Africa; she is happy there, goes to school, studies with her peers, loves apricots, and takes care of her ill grandmother. She has been waiting for me for a long time. If Anansi manages to escape, he will go after her and kill her.' Sinbad was shocked to learn about this.

'Promise me, Sinbad,' he said. 'And not the kind of promise that you made last time. You cannot let him escape, even if it means sacrificing Safeena forever. I cannot lose my daughter.'

Sinbad clenched his jaw. In his weak moments, he had thought of allowing Anansi to escape so that Safeena would come back, but he couldn't let his friend's daughter die.

'Promise me, Sinbad?' His voice was almost cracking. Seeing such a big man tear up wasn't what he thought this night would entail.

'I promise.' Sinbad said, unsure of how he will gather the strength to follow through.

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TWENTY-FIVE

Sinbad found himself in the library.

He had gone to sleep for just a short time, but the nightmare had appeared again and he found himself in the realm of Iblis's choosing. Here, he was dressed as a librarian, with spectacles, a hat, and a long shawl draped around him, as he read through many books.

'Do you believe in stories?' The voice called out.

Sinbad was getting frustrated, he didn't want to entertain the devil. He tried to exit the library, but found himself walking into the same library he had walked out of.

The voice spoke with more clarity now. 'No point running. You are in a dream. Just pinch yourself and save the hassle.'

Sinbad tried to pinch himself, but nothing happened, and laughter ensued.

'Did you really try that? You know, there was a story.' The voice began as he entered the frame, walking with a book in his hand. 'It went like this: "Sleep carefully or the Shaitan will sit on your chest and pin you against the bed. It slowly evolved into a sleeping disorder, also known as sleep paralysis. The shamans realized it was not the Shaitan who did this.' And then he whispered under his breath, 'Little did they know. Heh.'

'So this is sleep paralysis?' Sinbad asked.

'One of the few tricks I have learned during my stay in Qlitop. One can become really powerful as time goes by,' said Iblis.

Sinbad sighed. 'Listen, let's cut to the chase. I know about the wild hunt. I know what you plan to do.'

‘And I know you have entered the first realm and obtained the artefact,’ Iblis shook his head. ‘How many times do I have to tell you that you should not do this? But don’t fret. I will forgive your last transgression against me. However, I insist that you don’t delve any deeper, otherwise, I assure you, it can get a lot more problematic for you. I will *have* to stop you then.’

‘Why haven’t you then?’

Iblis sighed. ‘You make things unnecessarily difficult, Sinbad, but I’ll begin, nonetheless. The story that I am about to tell you has power. Words have a greater advantage over the human race than anything out there. You can destroy an entire childhood in one word. Yes.’

‘Yes?’ Sinbad asked.

‘Yes,’ Iblis smiled. ‘Well then, the story that I’m about to tell you is about a thief and his family.’

He opened the book and from there, spectral colours and sparks flew out, creating the visual manifestations of the words that Iblis uttered.

‘The thief was a grand one. One of the best in Baghdad. He would steal anything and everything. Everyone was frustrated with him, though he stole to provide for his family. Stealing was the only thing he was good at.’

The spectres changed into a thief’s image that stole a crown. He gave the crown to the merchants in exchange for gold and gave gifts to his family and son.

‘The family didn’t know one thing—the real reason behind his need to steal. He was going to die. The thief had a genetic disease he knew would cause his death soon, so he needed to accumulate as much wealth as he could manage. But that genetic disease . . . he knew was passed on to his son that too at a young age.

‘The thief was scared. He didn’t want anything to do with it, so he tried looking for a solution everywhere, but alas, he died trying and could only leave a note to his wife,’ Iblis whispered. ‘“Save him,” he had said to his wife. “We don’t have much time before he succumbs and dies early as well.”’

The image of the wife changed as she was seen going to shops, merchants, to places and doing all the hard work.

‘She did everything. Sought everything. But even magic couldn’t fight that disease. No object in this world could save the kid,’ he said. ‘Until there was a way, something the witches told her. A deal with the devil.’

‘Sell your soul to the devil and in return, you shall get what you want. The only one who could fight this illness is the devil himself.’

Sinbad arched his brows. For some reason, this story felt oddly familiar to him.

‘So, she called on the devil, and the devil who was looking for a good soldier, a good slave, agreed. But in turn, the woman was tied to him forever. And as long as she served him, the boy would live.’

No.

Sinbad gritted his teeth. ‘Don’t you dare. Don’t you dare!’

Iblis closed the book and the spectral images died. ‘You were put in the front of the guild where your master found you, took you in, and erased all your memories.’

‘That’s why my mother works for you? To keep me alive?’ Sinbad asked with tears in his eyes.

‘Fatima has always wanted the best for you,’ Iblis said. ‘I have given her everything, but all she wants to do is serve me. A deal with the devil cannot be undone, even by the devil himself. The consequences are too severe. It can only be undone if she breaks the oath, which she has proved time and again, she is incapable of doing.’

‘That means,’ Sinbad was at loss of words and he was shivering, his hands sweaty and clammy and his face tightened with stress.

‘Yes, I’m bound by a mother’s love to not hurt you.’ Iblis sighed, shrugging off the thought of killing Sinbad. ‘Otherwise, I would have loved to kill you a long time back. But I’ll be honest with you, with time, I’ve begun to like you. I have begun to like you because my daughter loves you, and since we are like family, I would like you to be a part of this. So you can be with her, marry her, and have children. Come live in a paradise where there’s no crime, no helplessness, no politics, just love and light. Light-bringer, as my name means.’

Sinbad couldn’t handle it any longer, he pinched himself hard, and this time, Iblis let him go. Sinbad left with a tear in his eyes.

When Sinbad woke up, chaos surrounded him. He fell from his bed and cascaded across the corridor, to the helm and then to the deck, where he saw what was happening: it was the enemy ship.

‘They learned Ashrafiyah was spying on them,’ Idris rushed to his side. ‘As you can see they have engaged in battle,’

‘Who are they?’ Sinbad asked.

Ashrafiyah, who was circling the deck in the form of an eagle, swooped down. She turned into a human with a spark and rolled over on the deck. ‘It’s our old crewmate. Your darling Safeena, and that red-haired nuisance.’

‘Fatima . . .’ Sinbad locked eyes with the red-haired woman on the opposite ship, which had raised the catapults.

And she looked back at him.

‘Mother . . .’

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TWENTY-SIX

Both ships clashed, disrupting the usually calm night with a barrage of noise. The catapults flung missiles at each other—from Greek fire to large rocks that are naturally toxic.

Sinbad unsheathed his sword and leapt into the fray, shouting at his companions to cease fire.

'Are you mad?' everyone screamed together. Ashrafiyah and Emir had bared their teeth, readying their magic, while Idris brandished her double-sided spear, Markus his hammer, and Husayn his bow and arrows. Pressa was pushed inside with a knife tucked against her chest to prevent her from doing anything reckless.

'I want to reason with them,' Sinbad said, turning to look at the enemy ship. He saw his mother standing next to Safeena, her cat eyes were shining in the darkness. A storm was raging around them, causing the water to become turbulent and the sky to darken with rain. Sinbad wondered if his mother was responsible for the storm.

He lifted his sword to show that he was not attacking, and the enemy crew remained quiet.

'Why are they quiet?' asked Idris. 'That's baffling.'

'I have a bad feeling about this,' Ashrafiyah said. 'They are on to something, and I don't know what.'

'Let's figure that out once we are done with handling them,' Sinbad said. 'I don't want to fight. I want to go my way and let them go theirs.

Everyone was silent. The attacks had ceased, but the rain was heavy.

His eyes shifted to Safeena; there was a long pause. Then

suddenly, she twisted her hands, a red spark emanated from her fingers, possessing the ship with her magic. The crew on the lower deck of the ship started running around in panic, some were screaming while others were howling like possessed souls, as if they were under some demonic influence.

'Oh, that dirty hag!' Ashrafiyah gritted her teeth.

The crew members turned to look at Sinbad and Ashrafiyah.

'Just keep them busy while I reverse this magic.' Ashrafiyah told Sinbad.

Markus and Idris stood close to Emir, ready with their weapons. Husayn was in position with his bow and arrows, ready to shoot if anyone attacked. Sinbad, seeing that his attempt to grab hold of a rope and board the other ship was unsuccessful, looked on helplessly as he saw his mother's ship departing with the draugrs onboard. The ship was headed towards a teleportation fog closeby, about to disappear into it.

I have to talk to my mother.

Sinbad called out to Emir. 'Is it true that vampires have a lot of strength?'

'It is true.'

'Can you throw me over there?'

'Are you mad?'

'I'm serious.'

'Like a ball?'

'Very much like a ball.'

Emir was not sure about the plan.

'Then roll up like a ball,' he said.

Sinbad tugged his legs against his chest and wrapped his hands around his knees. 'I am ready.'

Emir picked him up, as if he didn't weigh anything and said, 'This is a craziest thing I've done.'

Idris reached their side while Markus was busy with the possessed crew. 'Are you mad?'

'That's what I said,' Emir said, shaking his head.

'They will kill you,' she said.

'I have a feeling they won't,' Sinbad responded. 'Trust me.'

She flared her nostrils. 'Off you go then. A quick pro tip—keep

somersaulting in the air, so the motion is constant.'

Emir threw him across the sea, and while his power was insurmountable—Sinbad somersaulted in the air as Idris had suggested. He landed hard on the corner of the ship and held on to the ledge tightly, slowly pulling himself up to avoid falling into the ocean. Once he was up, he found himself surrounded by draugrs on the ship.

His mother rolled her eyes. 'Can you let it go, Sinbad? Stop this chase and stop trying to save the world.'

Safeena was then readying her magic to push the ship towards the cloud.

'I know what happened with you. You don't have to protect me anymore,' Sinbad said.

'You don't know anything.' Fatima retorted.

'Am I who you wanted me to be?' Sinbad asked. 'Are you proud?'

'You are protected,' Fatima said, turning to Safeena, who then used her sparks to throw a ball of force towards Sinbad.

He managed to dodge it as the draugrs came in between. He slashed and stabbed it, parrying with one who had a spear before kicking that draugr in the sea. He fought off the draugrs, slashing and stabbing them and parrying with one who had a spear before kicking that draugr into the sea. Sinbad then looked at Safeena as Fatima left the scene and the ship started dissolving inside the fog.

'Please don't do this,' Sinbad pleaded with Safeena. But she looked at him as if she didn't even know him and didn't care. Her face was cold, without any warmth.

The draugr was about to push him, and Safeena used her magic to throw it off, but Sinbad grabbed her by the arm and pulled her down, causing both of them to fall into the sea. As they were falling, Sinbad pulled out a sphere from his pocket and held her tight.

Before he could press the button on the sphere, Safeena grinned and said, 'I know what you are trying to do.' She then began to stay suspended in the air, showing her control over her flight, before landing back on the ship. Sinbad fell into the ocean, gasping for air and struggling to stay afloat in the dark waters. As he swam alone, he imagined what it would have been like to have Safeena as his

companion in this realm, but here he was, stranded in the ocean.

All alone.

*

He was drenched and covered in a towel, shivering from the cold. His crew stared at him, their mouths agape, after he had explained why he did what he did. ‘So Sinbad cannot die, which is great.’ Husayn said. ‘But that doesn’t mean, the rest of us can’t. So why hasn’t Iblis killed us?’

‘I’ve wondered that too,’ Idris chimed in. ‘Perhaps we could be of some use to him?’

‘He’s like that,’ Sinbad said. ‘From the little I’ve talked to him and the performance he has shown me, he believes no life should go wasted without completing its goals. Why bother to kill someone for no reason when you can get help from them?’

‘How are we helping him?’ Markus said.

Everyone was silent.

‘We should all think of theories as to why,’ Sinbad said. ‘I need to journey to the second realm and find the Lamp of Set. We don’t have time. Safeena has escaped too. All we know is that they don’t want to kill us—*for now*. But they know we are looking for the objects.’

‘The only theory that presents itself which is also strikingly simple . . .’ Emir said biting his nails is, ‘is that they *want* us to find these objects. It makes sense why they are not killing us and tailing us instead. They know that we are on our objective.’

‘No, but Iblis told me not to look for the objects,’ Sinbad said.

Emir nodded. ‘It’s probably because he wants to make it less obvious how much he wants those things, right?’ Everyone went quiet. Sinbad just smacked himself on the forehead. ‘Of course, how stupid of me. Now I wonder where Admiral Sakhr learned about all these.’ He referred to his earlier foe whom he had fought in the last adventure and who had been using the same tactics that Iblis had back then. They were too late in that situation, here though—they know. ‘He’s making us do his bidding, that’s why he’s keeping us alive.’

‘How do you explain my vision then?’ Pressa finally spoke up. She was clearly offended.

‘That’s true. How do you explain her visions?’ Emir asked Sinbad.

‘That is your theory! Why are you asking me?’ Sinbad exclaimed.

Emir shrugged and said sorry.

‘It could be because she’s working with Iblis, maybe?’ Markus suggested, eyeing the young Chinese girl.

‘What! Have you no brains in that thick skull of yours?’ Pressa rasped. ‘I knew Sinbad and Husayn before y’all. I have sacrificed too many things to be here, including my family. So no, you are wrong.’

Ashrafiyah intervened. ‘All right, all right, calm down, darling. What if Iblis has entered your mind and filled it with an alternate vision? You know like theatre? An orchestrated vision? Maybe it is not real at all. That explains why you were not given full vision. Like these objects . . . what is the reason behind us getting them? No idea, right?’

‘Is that possible?’ Pressa asked herself, leaning against the wall.

‘Seer brainwashing has only been done once in history. A long time ago.’ Idris added. ‘That too by Iblis himself. I was worried about it, but I thought of it as just a story.’

Sinbad mumbled back what Iblis had said in the dream. ‘Stories have power.’

‘What?’ asked Idris, curious. ‘What should we do now?’

The tension within the group was clearly evident. Everyone began to quarrel with each other. Sinbad calmed them down, as he said in a louder voice, ‘Let’s go according to his plan. That way, we’ll be alive, even if it’s for a while, and it will buy us time. I have an idea brewing in my head, how to turn this whole thing against him. Let the enemy think he knows better, that he’s wiser. The moment his arrogance takes over his next move, that is when we attack.’

‘But getting those weapons, they could be advantageous for him, right?’ Idris asked. ‘That way, we’re just helping him out.’

Sinbad thought for a moment. ‘These weapons had a way to stop Iblis in a parallel world. The Sword of Beowulf, for instance, actually killed Iblis in that world. So these weapons he’s getting us

to gather from other worlds, I don't think they are fake or have a fake history. He must have some other nefarious plan with them. I have a plan to get these weapons, he knows that.' Sinbad continued, 'He's watching us. If we don't get these weapons, he'll know and he will try to kill us. He knows about the Sword of Beowulf. We have to get the Lamp of Set and the Poison of Asag. That way, we will be able to stay alive. All we need to do is *not* let these weapons fall into his hands. See, Iblis is powerful—way more than we could ever anticipate. We can admit that now. The only reason we are alive is because he's *allowed* us to stay alive. And the only way to defeat him is not through big battles, big muscles or even big brains. We can only rely on one thing.'

'What?' everyone asked in unison.

'Luck.'

They all smacked their faces in frustration.

Pressa, still in a dazed state, spoke up, 'The good part is that my vision of Sinbad's death is probably also just a fake one.' She sounded unsure.

There was a moment of silence until Markus broke it with a question. 'So you have a plan or not? Last time, that didn't work out so well.'

Sinbad let out a heavy sigh. He was already in crisis mode, feeling disappointed and worried. 'Yes, it didn't work out last time. But I have a feeling that this time it will.' He nodded to himself, trying to gather his thoughts and figure out the next move.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

The moment Ashrafiyah and Sinbad entered the new realm, Ashrafiyah asked eagerly, ‘Where are the hot balloons and the jet skis?’

Sinbad scanned his surroundings, and he felt something was wrong. They had reached the same place that they were before, it looked like Baghdad. The morning was just as hot and sunny, but the colours were more vibrant, and the air was thicker. However, other than that, the city was the same.

‘It looks the same! Did it take us to the right place? Did you work the ball right?’ Ashrafiyah asked, looking at the sphere Sinbad held. ‘I think it didn’t work.’

They were standing near the docks, where people were loading cargo on to the ships. There were many boats and other freight ships there, and the people had all kinds of colourful glimmer about them.

‘There is a difference. People wear flashier clothes here,’ Sinbad said.

‘Indeed, they do. But I didn’t travel all the way just to see the same things,’ Ashrafiyah said. ‘They say that a parallel realm is supposed to be different.’

They decided to explore the city, hoping to find something different, but there was nothing. They walked the streets, the city interiors, and the common areas. The beggars were the same, and even the elite merchants were doing auctions, hiring labour, and selling all kinds of material.

‘I’m sorry to disappoint you but if this is a parallel realm, then

this is a parallel realm,' Sinbad said.

'Husayn had all the fun,' said Ashrafiyah, sighing.

'Did you really come here just to see another realm out of curiosity?' Sinbad asked.

'Yeah,' Ashrafiyah rolled her eyes. 'Also, other things. We haven't had a chance to talk. It's been a back-to-back ride since . . . I don't even remember when.'

'Yes. I even missed my birthday. I'm eighteen years old now,' Sinbad said.

'We should celebrate,' Ashrafiyah chuckled. 'I remember being eighteen. It was a long, long time ago though.'

Sinbad had always thought about one of the curses of being a vampire—to live forever. 'What's on your mind?'

'Ever since the incident with Iblis, rising. I've been practising and researching,' Ashrafiyah said quietly.

'What?' Sinbad asked, curious.

'Going back to mortality,' said Ashrafiyah.

'Why would you do that?' Sinbad asked, shocked.

But he immedietly realized, he shouldn't have asked. Of course, she wanted to go down that road. 'Oh because of her'

'Yes.'

'I have still not met her,' Sinbad said.

'You were busy saving the world. Once we are done with this, my dear, I'll set up a nice date for the three of us,' Ashrafiyah said.

'Sounds grand,' smiled Sinbad. 'Does she want you to be mortal?'

'No,' Ashrafiyah shrugged. 'She likes me the way I am. But I just . . . I don't want her to wither away while I live forever. That's too scary a thought.'

Sinbad nodded as they made their way to the bazaar, where a large crowd had gathered. Monkeys danced, fish were being sold, and fruit and vegetable vendors called out to customers. Street performers put on shows for onlookers. The sun beat down on them as they navigated through the busy street.

'Did you find anything?'

'Yeah, I think I did,' Ashrafiyah replied.

'And?' Sinbad pressed.

'It could mean I'd die.' Ashrafiyah said. 'Or I could become mortal

again. No more vampires. It's one of the ancient rituals and very tough.'

'You don't know and are not sure whether you should continue?' Sinbad asked.

'Yes. But more than that—I would lose my magic too.' Ashrafiyah said. 'I could lose everything I've learnt and built over a period of time.'

Sinbad was stuck in this situation, and his advice would mean nothing. He had no idea what to even say here. 'What are you thinking?'

'Risk and reward.' she said. 'What if she leaves me after that? And I'm stuck being a boring human.'

'Thanks.'

'No offence,' Ashrafiyah smiled.

They reached a second-hand gift shop, where Ashrafiyah stopped and looked at a very nice quill. 'I would like to gift you that for your birthday.'

'Why?'

'So you can write me letters. That was our thing. Remember? Or have you forgotten that like everything else.'

Sinbad sighed. 'Of course, I remember. It was always nice to write to you. Our friendship is precious to me.'

'You were my respite during those days,' Ashrafiyah smiled. 'Remember I was having problems with my father that time? Oh god, I don't want to remember his face anymore.' She asked the seller. 'How much for that?'

The seller said, 'Two golds, miss.'

Ashrafiyah pulled out a purse from her pocket and handed two gold coins to the man. 'What is this?' He cursed, backing away.

'Whatever do you mean?'

'*This* is a gold coin.' He showed a coin from his till.

The two peered into the coin to see an embossing of a heavy-set man with a large beard and a huge balloon-like hat.

'Who in the seven hells is this?'

'The Caliph, of course,' the man screamed. 'Are you both from outside the country? Oh, I don't serve foreigners!' he said suspiciously.

Sinbad remembered the Caliph to be young and handsome and here this man was bulbous, pompous and had a very angry expression for some reason.

'So this is a realm where people look different?' Sinbad whispered to Ashrafiyah.

By then, a young announcer had appeared—a young boy who was shouting loudly at the top of his lungs:

'SINBAD THE SAILOR HAS ARRIVED! SINBAD THE SAILOR HAS RETURNED FROM HIS ADVENTURE TO THE CITY OF BRASS!'

The announcement caused everyone in the bazaar to drop what they were doing and rush towards the source of commotion. The crowd was frenzied and seemed to be in a hurry, as if Sinbad were someone of great importance.

'So you are a kind of a celebrity here?' Ashrafiyah asked. 'Interesting. Let's see what the celebrity Sinbad is like.'

The seller grumbled as if he had overheard the conversation. 'Sinbad the Sailor is one grub of a person. Always outsmarting everyone, but ever since she made a deal with the Caliphate, she has been running around doing odd jobs and acting like an adventurous, swashbuckling fighter, one would say. What a tramp!' He growled further.

Ignoring the grumpy seller, Sinbad and Ashrafiyah blended in with the crowd and looked ahead to catch a glimpse of the legendary sailor. Sinbad noticed the ship, which was larger with a bigger crew and sophisticated weapons and felt a tad bit jealous.

Working with the Caliphate? That is what Sinbad is doing.

'This is going to be so much fun,' Ashrafiyah clapped and laughed. 'I'm having a ball here.'

Sinbad looked at her, irritably. 'We have to find the Lamp of Set. So we shouldn't waste time.'

'Oh, come on,' Ashrafiyah said as she playfully slapped his shoulder. 'After hearing about this version of you, how can we not enjoy ourselves a bit?'

The ship was docked, and the crowd clapped and cheered as the crew made their way down. They had returned from the City of Brass, and it was rumoured that they had come back with silver, gold, and other jewels. The City of Brass was famous, or rather

infamous, as the undead city of the Arabs, as the queen believed that they could feed on gold and those who perished from a catastrophic famine. The entire situation felt like a fantasy.

But nothing was more fantastical than the moment when Sinbad saw Safeena. She was part of the crew, wearing loose dark pants, a white blouse with a half jacket, a broad-brimmed hat, carrying a sabre.

In this world, Safeena is part of Sinbad's crew. She seems almost the same age as him. Nothing is different about her here. Nothing extraordinary. They're probably together and happy.

'SINBAD THE SAILOR IS HERE!' someone shouted from the crowd.

'I can't see him,' Sinbad said, confused. 'Can you?'

'Erm, Sinbad?'

'Yeah?'

'There's a reason you can't see *him*,' she said, as all the crowd began to walk up to Safeena and shake hands with her. 'Because Sinbad the Sailor is a woman in this world.'

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TWENTY-EIGHT

The night had fallen, and Sinbad and Ashrafiyah had been scouting the area.

Ashrafiyah was chewing on a loaf of bread as she commented, 'The food here is different too.'

Sinbad nodded as he stood, watching the ship of Lady Sinbad—yes, that's what they called her—was quite visible. The crowd had dispersed after a while as the ship's crew got busy for the day. Sinbad wanted to find an opening in all of this so he could go and talk to her.

But what would he say?

He should be going to the library to search for the Lamp of Set, and yet he was here, intrigued, by the notion that Safeena from his world was him in this one.

There has to be something. It doesn't fit right.

'This realm is different but not exactly. That's the weird part though,' he mused.

'Yeah,' Sinbad said thoughtlessly.

'I am a hula dancer who likes to jump through the hoops in a monkey dress.'

'Sounds about right,' Sinbad replied.

'You are not listening!' Ashrafiyah screamed.

Sinbad was astounded. 'Can you shut up? We are spying.'

'For what? There's a lady version of you in this world. How is that a big deal?'

'The big deal is that she looks like Safeena.'

'No, she doesn't,' Ashrafiyah said, rolling her eyes.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked, shocked.

‘She looks like Safeena in *your* or our world. In this world, Safeena and Sinbad could be one. We should be looking for the bloody lamp rather than sitting here . . .’

Sinbad saw a hooded figure exiting the docks and moving for the streets as he shushed the vampire witch up. ‘Let’s move. Let’s see who this is and where they are headed.’

‘Women don’t like stalkers, and I am a woman. I am sure that person isn’t supposed to be here. Let’s go,’ Ashrafiyah hissed.

‘It’s a good thing,’ Sinbad said, following the stalker from one building to another, moving in the shadows. ‘That’s a girl.’

‘Argh!’

Sinbad and Ashrafiyah moved at quick paces; their footwork was light and their bodies were vessels of silence. Everything was fine until the figure turned the corner, and they could hear whispers. Sinbad and Ashrafiyah leaned against the wall as he saw that the figure pulled back the cowl. In front of her were two big Caliphate soldiers, wearing big tunics, large balloon pants and humongous hats. They looked like cartoonish version of themselves, with kohl in their eyes.

‘Why is everything so exaggerated?’ Sinbad raised his brows. ‘Like it’s some theatre play?’

They decided to eavesdrop.

‘How about you give us what you have, and we will be on our way?’ one of the soldiers said. ‘The Caliph is angry. You took double the investment, and the rumour is you didn’t bring what you were intended to from Brass, but rather empty jewels and gold.’

‘The rumors aren’t baseless,’ said Safeena, her voice thick with a richer accent than the one they were used to, and lacking the broken quality of someone who had learned the language later in life. ‘I didn’t bring what was asked, that’s true, but that is because I didn’t find what you were looking for,’ Safeena continued.

‘But the last known sighting of Al Miraj was there,’ said one of the soldiers.

Al Miraj? Sinbad narrowed his gaze. *Never heard of that name.*

‘All the books, maps and written decrees have pointed towards that city. The Queen had it as a pet, and now you say you didn’t

find it,' the other man spoke now.

'Might have escaped?' Safeena had a hint of humour in her voice.

'It's a bloody bunny!' The second soldier exclaimed. 'With horns. How difficult can it be to find?'

'It wasn't difficult. It just wasn't there,' she said firmly. 'Sorry, gentlemen, but I cannot help you here. Please convey my regrets to your Caliph.'

The two guards looked at each other and grabbed hold of her. 'Why don't you tell him that yourself?'

'Hey, he agreed that if I don't find anything, I'll be let go.'

'He doesn't care,' said one of the soldiers who had a sword across her throat. 'He has spent so much on you, he wants his duties to be completed.'

'But I have completed the tasks given to me every single time. It was just this time . . .'

'No room for error with the Caliph,' the soldier interrupted.

Lady Sinbad tried to wriggle free; she punched one guard and tried to grab the sword from him, before she was tackled and thrown on the ground.

Sinbad knew he had to intervene and jumped out of hiding. 'Hey, you!'

The two soldiers were taken aback and froze for a minute, confused as they looked at him. Using this as a way forward, Lady Sinbad kicked one of them in the heel and pulled out a small knife, which she swung and slashed across the other soldier's cheek. He began to whimper and pull back. 'Tell the Caliph I'm no one's slave,' From inside her hood, she pulled out a bag full of jewels. 'This is what I found, and this is what you will get,' she said as she tossed it on the ground before moving towards Sinbad and locking eyes with him.

'Who do you think you are listening to private conversations . . .' she started, but then words fell short as her eyes grew wide and face went pale all of a sudden. 'Sinbad? Is that you? Have you returned?'

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TWENTY-NINE

Two mugs of apricot juice were brought to the table, and Safeena ordered a glass of goat milk.

The trio sat in the tavern amidst the bustling sounds and dazzling lights in a foot-thumping, fist-raising uproar. Safeena had led them to this place after their meeting in the alley.

'So there are multiple realms?' Safeena asked, sipping her milk with a straight face. 'And you come from the one where Iblis is alive and making life a living hell?'

Sinbad had explained to her about his experience of jumping across realms.

'Yes,' he nodded, grinning to himself.

It felt strange talking to Safeena normally, like old friends. It was a dream he never thought he would be real in this lifetime now.

'Interesting,' she said, taking another sip. 'And here I was getting happy thinking that my Sinbad has returned.'

'Okay, I'm confused, my lady,' Ashrafiyah scratched her black hair. 'I thought you *are* Sinbad in this realm. So how can you lose your Sinbad?'

Lady Sinbad laughed in spite of herself, 'Call me Safeena. That's my real name. Sinbad is just a title I inherited.'

'From whom?'

'My husband.'

'Your what?' Sinbad spat out his juice, his heart fluttering.

'Yes,' Safeena sighed. 'We were married. I worked as a dancer, trapped under the oppressive thumb of a wretched employer, until he came to my rescue. Together, we embarked on thrilling

adventures as pirates, navigating the vast expanse of the seven seas. However, fate dealt a cruel hand, and he fell prey to unfortunate circumstances.' She lowered her eyes out of sadness.

'What happened then?' Sinbad asked, intrigued.

'That's where Iblis comes to play. There was a djinn, Iblis, who was planning to trap everyone into a state of dreams and nightmares. Sinbad learned of this plan and apprehended him. While they fought, Sinbad was able to trick him into entering the Lamp of Set and, in the process, he was trapped inside it as well.'

Safeena sighed, taking a deep breath, as if it were still a hard thing to speak about. 'Ever since then, I have taken on the role of ridding evil from the world by putting his name out in the right way.'

Sinbad smiled.

'Why are you so weirdly happy?' Safeena asked looking up at him.

'You are doing well,' Sinbad said, sitting up, as Ashrafiyah rolled her eyes.

'I lost track of my job, though. Thanks for intervening and dumbfounding them.' she scratched her shoulders. Her clothes were similar to Sinbad's but flashier. 'It's been years now he hasn't returned and the funny part is—no one knows he saved the world.'

'Hmm,' said Sinbad, feeling a little sad. 'Is there a guild here?'

'I'm sorry, what is a guild?' Safeena asked, looking confused.

Ah, so there is no guild here? How did Sinbad here acquire all his skills?

Which then led to his next question, 'You talked about the Lamp of Set? Do you know where that is?'

She arched her brows. 'Why do you ask?'

'We believe it has to do something with ending Iblis,' he said. 'We could be wrong, but if we are able to replicate what this realm's Sinbad was able to do . . .'

'Oh, no. Absolutely not. Whoever rubs that lamp, becomes part of it. That's what happened with Sinbad too. No. Can't let that happen,' she said shaking her head. 'And once you enter, you cannot leave. No matter how much you try. Sinbad knew that when he trapped Iblis. You know Set, right? He was a powerful god of

chaos and war, and also a trickster who loved trapping his victims. While everyone, in general, loved to escape from wherever they were trapped, Set didn't. He liked the world he had built inside that lamp. And if you undertake this, instead of letting Set out, you'll be trapped there. It'll be chaos, and more than that—it will end your lives. I would suggest, respectfully, that you find another way.'

Sinbad clenched his jaw, and Ashrafiyah shared a glance with him. Safeena looked awfully low on energy, and Sinbad would have spoken further when Ashrafiyah intervened.

'I know how it feels,' She touched Safeena's arm. 'But we come from a realm where magic is far more prominent and stronger than this world. I am a witch myself, not the evil kind of witch. But as someone who can figure out the mechanics of the lamp. If you lead us there, there is a possibility that I might be able to release Sinbad from the lamp.'

'You can what?' Safeena's eye just lit up with hope.

'But how do I trust you?' She asked. 'I have no clue about you both. Am I supposed to trust you just because you look like my husband?'

'Hey, that's reason enough,' Sinbad smiled.

Safeena smiled back, warmly. She seemed happy. 'Tell me something, how is my counterpart in your realm?'

'Well,' Sinbad shrugged, 'she wants to kill me most of the time.'

'Kind of explains my relationship with this realm's Sinbad, so I get it,' Safeena chuckled.

They all laughed, creating a good and light atmosphere, a welcome change from the tense situations Sinbad had been experiencing for so long.

'By the time the fight had ended,' she began completing the story, 'they were both trapped in the lamp. Sinbad had learnt about this lamp through his adventures and wanted to use it to stop Iblis. It would have been the only way. He had to find it through multiple trials on one of the many islands in Egypt. Eventually, I happened to reach the place, but they had vanished. A merchant helped me safeguard the lamp, and it's hidden in a very important place which he wouldn't reveal unless I accompany you.'

'Let's go,' Sinbad said, getting up. 'We don't have much time.'

‘All right, all right,’ Safeena said, standing up and pushing back the chair. ‘I’ll take you to the merchant.’

As the trio walked through the tavern, passing the area where the music was being played, something caught Sinbad’s attention. A familiar figure was playing the oud. It was none other than Husayn!

Here, he looked less troubled and carefree as he was playing with a great sense of calm. It reminded Sinbad of the time when they used to work for the tavern in their early days.

‘Do you know him?’ Sinbad asked.

‘Husayn? Oh yeah, he’s really talented,’ Safeena replied.

‘Did Sinbad and Husayn know each other?’

Safeena looked confused. ‘Huh? Why would they?’ she said, pausing. ‘Oh wait . . . they knew each other for a brief time when they both worked in the tavern, but Husayn chose not to go on the adventures with Sinbad, and they ended their companionship there. He was just an acquaintance, nothing more. Why do you ask?’ Safeena quizzed.

‘Just curious.’

In this realm, Husayn never became Sinbad’s companion and lived a good life as an artist.

‘By the way who’s the merchant we are meeting?’ Ashrafiyah asked, cutting short his train of thoughts.

‘He used to be a porter. Smart chap. But found a gang of thieves and stole from them. He invested all the riches smartly, and voila, he became a rich man.’ Safeena said. ‘He goes by the name of Ali Baba.’

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THIRTY

Lady Sinbad or Safeena?
Let me call her Safeena.

As they travelled through the night in Safeena's carriage, with Sinbad and Ashrafiyah in tow, Safeena shared the backstory of the man they were about to meet.

'His name is Ali Baba,' she began. 'He was once a young peasant, a porter, who was bullied by everyone around him. But one day, while resting in the forest, he saw forty thieves enter a cave. Not just any cave—it was a cave full of riches that they had gathered. So what did he do? With his brother Qasim, he decided to rob the robbers.'

Sinbad raised an eyebrow. 'So we're meeting a robber?'

'He isn't as bad as he sounds, to be honest.' Safeena said, shrugging. 'Anyhow, when he reached the cave, he found that the cave had no entrance. Perplexed, he hid in the bushes and when the forty thieves came, he overheard that the cave would only open with the words, "Open, Sesame".'

'Sounds like a story written for children,' Ashrafiyah said, rolling her eyes.

Safeena laughed. 'Yes, somewhat. Anyway, Ali found the treasure inside and, of course, he stole it from the thieves. In the beginning, he stole small amounts, hoping they wouldn't notice, but as his greed took over, he stole everything. After that, he went on to become a merchant, an investor who held many such professions. In fact, he sometimes gives me odd jobs to find treasures for him.'

‘So you work for him?’ he asked, surprised.

She sighed. ‘Hmm, I suppose you could say that. But call it the curse of the robbers or whatever you want to, he never found another trove of treasure after that.’

‘What happened to the robbers?’ Ashrafiyah asked.

‘They realized what had happened, of course. Ali had gotten rich overnight. They tried to get hold of him but Ali managed to evade them and fled here to Basra,’ she continued. ‘He met my husband and funded his adventures too, hoping for more treasure until he learned about the Lamp of Set. Sinbad went to collect it and ended up fighting Iblis, only for me to end up holding it. Ali told me to keep it with me, but I thought the lamp would be safer with him since he had a magical cave.’

‘So we are meeting a thief,’ Sinbad said. ‘I’m quite excited, indeed.’

As they made their way towards an oasis where the camp was settled, Sinbad saw a group of heavily armed African soldiers guarding it, with one of them looking familiar.

Markus.

It was Markus. Sinbad couldn’t help but smile at the sight of Markus standing there.

Markus stopped their cavalry and asked:

‘Safeena, what a warm welcome. How is it going?’

‘I have bought audience to Ali.’ Safeena replied.

‘He’s busy,’ Markus looked at Sinbad suspiciously.

It was strange for Sinbad to see someone he knew so well while the other person had no idea who he was.

‘Come on, Markus. Do it for me. Next time, I’ll bring some bamboo juice.’

Markus grinned. ‘You know exactly what to say.’ He then turned to his soldiers and ordered them in their language, telling them to let the trio enter.

Sinbad realized that if Markus hadn’t met Sinbad, he would’ve been working for this Ali Baba—which put into perspective that there was an Ali Baba in his world.

They dismounted from their horses, and Sinbad saw the camp, where there were soldiers, cooks, children and more were bustling

around them. He moved to the end of the camp to find a man sitting on a rock, ordering his labourers to dig further.

Ali Baba, wearing a large robe with a design of moons and stars, was angry, visible veins on his forehead.

Looking at Safeena, he loudly claimed: 'Mehbooba! What a sight to behold, yes.' He beamed. Sinbad observed that the man sported a prominent tuft of facial hair, with a thick, luscious beard. As the man's smile broadened, Sinbad couldn't help but notice the glimmer of a gold tooth, adding a touch of shimmer to his grin.

'Digging for gold?' Safeena asked.

'As always.'

'When will it stop?' Safeena said. 'There's no amount of gold that can satiate you, Ali.'

The man laughed. 'I have begun to suspect I have a disease.'

'That's called greed, honey. Anyway, we need your help.' Safeena said, and she began to explain everything.

Ali listened, staring suspiciously at Sinbad and Ashrafiyah with his small eyes.

'So you want the Lamp of Set?' he asked at the end.

'Yes. They think they can help us bring back Sinbad,' she said hopefully.

'That's hogwash. Another realm? Hogwash. Parallel worlds . . . hogwash!' He screamed.

Sinbad had never seen an overly dramatic man like him, but then he got reminded of Constantine the Sixth, whom he met during one of his previous adventures.

'But if you insist, I kept the lamp in the cave. Follow me,' he said, and then looking at them suspiciously, he continued, 'Whatever magic they do, I want to see it firsthand. If they're good at it, they can probably turn something into gold. Like the story of Midas. What say, eh?'

Ashrafiyah added, 'You know what happened with King Midas, right?'

'What?'

As they walked, Sinbad saw that the canyons had opened up, revealing a closed cave.

'He lived happily ever after.'

‘He became gold himself,’ Sinbad added, rolling his eyes.

‘That’s the dream,’ Ali chuckled.

‘Open, Sesame!’ The others covered their ears as he shouted loudly, looking at the cave. ‘The cave, it has a hearing problem.’

‘Sure,’ Sinbad said through his gritted teeth. ‘I thought your cave was located somewhere else?’

‘Apparently, there are more.’ Ali said. ‘I had to go through multiple caves shouting “Open, Sesame”, for no reason, whatsoever. I looked like an idiot, I tell you,’ The man was wearing heaps of gold chains, big gold earrings, and a golden-coloured turban too.

Inside the cave, they found more gold than anywhere else. The cave led to a special pedestal where the Lamp of Set was supposed to be placed.

‘Where is it?’ Ali screamed, raising his hands. ‘I don’t understand. It’s supposed to be here!’ He screamed again.

‘Oh jolly,’ Sinbad muttered.

‘Someone stole it! GUARDS! SOMEONE STOLE IT!’ Ali kept yelling frantically, even though there was no guard around.

Sinbad went towards the podium and found a parchment. On it was written: ‘Warm regards, Aladdin’

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THIRTY-ONE

Sinbad found himself within the underbelly of Basra's underground black market, accompanied by Ashrafiyah, Safeena, and Ali Baba, who looked furious, with his nostrils flaring in agitation. Their purpose for venturing into this illicit realm was rooted in the belief that the infamous thief, Aladdin, could be found here.

'I am well acquainted with him,' Ali remarked, his voice resonating as they pressed onward. 'He is a renowned thief from one of China's cities.'

'He's of Chinese origin?' Safeena inquired, her curiosity piqued. 'Oh no. He was brought up there. Don't know how he happened to reach there. Some said his father was a smuggler who worked with the Chinese to export and import spices. Some said he was an orphan who somehow got shipped there. Anyway, he had come to Basra to earn riches and gold, like everyone else in this world. And he became a thief here. A low-life thief. The last I heard about him, he had been working for a retired vizier from the Maghreb, doing odd jobs for him. He must have had his eye on the lamp for a while. He must have planned this out thoroughly,' Ali Baba said this while gritting his teeth. 'Whatever Aladdin steals, he comes here to auction it off. I know this because, well, I often buy things from his auctions,' he said sheepishly.

Sinbad arched his brows, confused. 'For someone who got robbed, you know too much about the robbery yourself.'

'And low-life thief? Weren't you a low-life thief too?' Ashrafiyah asked angrily.

Ali Baba chose to ignore that statement, as they were in the black market district where there were other people—some with eye patches, some with crooked legs and all smelling of wine and mead.

In the front was a stage where different items were being auctioned off to various merchants, slumlords, etc. The presenter was an old man who had a hammer, and he was announcing the items, their significance, and how they were stolen.

'This anklet belonged to a maiden from the city of Frankish invaders,' said the old man reading the parchment. 'Not much information out there, but we believe it's made of gold. The method of robbery was funny. It was done by a cobbler.'

They all laughed.

Sinbad raised his eyebrows in surprise. While he knew that low-lifes existed in his version of Basra too, he had never seen anything like this before. The crowd looked cartoonish and over the top, and they all seemed like evil criminals. In his realm, it was impossible to separate the good from the evil, as everyone looked the same. Suddenly, he realized that this world was one where everything was black and white.

'Oooh, ooh, I want one, I bid, I bid!' Ali Baba shouted, raising his hands.

'What are you bidding on?' the auctioneer asked.

'I'd like to barter. I'll give you these earrings,' Ali took them out of his ears and showed them to the man. 'They're not real gold, but they look like it.'

'SOLD!' said the old man. 'We can sell it off as gold, surely.'

The anklet and the earrings were exchanged. Ali wore the anklet on his wrist, feeling glad.

'Why did they let fake gold be exchanged for real gold?' Ashrafiyah asked.

Safeena intervened and said, 'Whatever makes you think that the anklet is real gold? Everyone knows, something or the other is fake here.'

Sinbad nodded.

'The earnings from today will go towards funding the repair of the water tank in the middle of the city. It has begun to show cracks and needs to be fixed,' the old auctioneer announced, to which the

crowd agreed.

'Now on to the next item. Keeping the action heavy and exciting, I would like to present an interesting possession that we have come across. It is a lamp. A djinn probably resides in it, according to Aladdin, who stole it.'

Aladdin came forward with a charming grin. He had large eyes, brown skin, shabby hair, a small piece of cloth wrapped around his chest, revealing his bare, muscled chest, he wore a purple half jacket and white balloon pyjamas.

'Holy moly,' Ashrafiyah exclaimed, 'I would turn straight for him.'

Sinbad narrowed his gaze. 'What is so special about him?'

'He's gorgeous.' Ashrafiyah replied.

'He's all right.' Sinbad shrugged.

Safeena smiled. 'He's kind of cute.'

'You too? As your husband from another realm, I am envious.'

The old man interrupted, 'Now, let's begin the bidding. We're willing to accept barter as well. The proceeds will go towards repairing the water tank and to Aladdin himself, who's been quite a reckoning force. He's stolen so many things that he's well on his way to becoming the next Thief of Baghdad, following in the footsteps of our old friend—Sinbad.'

The crowd cheered in unison.

'Sinbad has been a role model for many,' Aladdin said in his honey-like voice. 'Especially for me. We all miss him and hope to see him soon, if he ever returns.'

The old man continued, 'Any takers for this lamp? Either for a barter or a handsome amount of money?' The crowd was silent until Ali Baba, who was in the darkness, raised his hand. The light prevented Aladdin from seeing him clearly. The old man asked, 'Who is this lad?'

'I am the one who bought the anklet,' Ali Baba said.

'Ah, it's Ali Baba.' The old man looked at Aladdin, who went pale.

'He stole this lamp from me! He will pay for it. This is no ordinary lamp. It holds a vicious god from Egyptian myths, not a djinn.'

The old man banged his hammer, and the crowd erupted in

laughter. ‘Did you steal this lamp, Aladdin?’ he asked.

Aladdin looked confused, Safeena remained silent.

As Aladdin scanned the crowd, his gaze settled on Ali Baba. Suddenly, he grabbed the lamp from the old man and whistled loudly. A large flying carpet swooped in, breaking through the roof. Aladdin leaped on to the carpet and shouted, ‘See ya!’ he said, as he flew away. Sinbad and Ali Baba were left bewildered.

‘What just happened?’ they asked simultaneously.

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THIRTY-TWO

Sinbad ran outside to find where the carpet was headed off to. Following him was the rest of his gang.

'This is the same kind of carpet you enchanted, remember?' Sinbad asked Ashrafiyah. 'Remember when we were chasing that warden.'

'Yeah. Makes me wonder how he got it,' she said wondering.

Ali Baba gritted his teeth. 'He must have stolen it! He is—'

Sinbad didn't hear what Ali Baba was saying, and he made a run for it, navigating through the narrow alleys and wide streets of the city. The flying carpet was moving at an incredibly fast pace, twisting and turning in the air. Sinbad's chest felt light, and he could feel the adrenaline burning inside him as he sprinted.

When Sinbad swung his sword across the sky, towards the carpet, creating a hole and causing the carpet to swish and turn as it crashed against the water tank.

Sinbad ran towards his sword, which was now lodged in the ground. He picked it up and cleaned off the dust, while observing the damage that had occurred. The large water tank that had been the topic of discussion at the auction had broken apart and gallons of water had spilled on to the streets. The poorly developed areas were now flooded, and the animals were drowning.

Sinbad saw that his feet were submerged as well, and the flying carpet had already flown away. He had to act fast when his eyes fell on a carpenter who was already crying over wet wood.

'I would require the reed boat you have in the store,' Sinbad said.

'Not for a dime less.'

‘I don’t have money but what I do have is a promise.’

‘What promise?’

‘In another world, another realm, I shall meet you and pay you for this when I have the money for it.’

Before the merchant could respond, Sinbad took the boat and the oar, and he threw them on the street where the water had gotten deeper. He began rowing it in the middle of the street, chasing the flying carpet. He found himself and the water moving towards a flight of stairs. As the boat hit the stairs, it began to vibrate, while Aladdin on his carpet swung almost close to him, shouting, ‘Why are you following me? What do you want from me? Who are you?’

Sinbad didn’t answer, his boat was being rocked by the multiple stairs. Just then, he heard the galloping of a horse, and turned to see Ali Baba on horseback. He was on the lane where the water hadn’t accumulated. All three—Sinbad, Aladdin and Ali Baba were moving horizontally, each wanting the lamp for their own purpose.

Aladdin quickened the speed of his carpet and moved further when the stairs ended, and the water went off. A large fountain was in the middle, and Sinbad CRASHED!

The impact flung him from his boat and towards Ali Baba’s horse, where he landed clumsily.

‘That was very cleverly planned,’ Ali said.

‘More like serendipitously,’ replied Sinbad, while steadying himself on the horse along with Ali.

Sinbad and Ali rode the horse together.

‘Get closer. I’ll grab hold of the carpet. It’s getting slower already because of the damage I did.’ Sinbad instructed.

‘All right, boss. Here we go,’ replied Ali.

The stallion sped up and neared the carpet, as Sinbad grabbed hold of its corner. Then, precariously balancing himself half on the carpet and half on the horse, he stood up.

In front, a carriage appeared in full speed.

‘LOOK OUT! LEGS UP!’ Ali Baba yelled.

Sinbad managed to pull himself up just in time and dodge the oncoming carriage before he found himself on the flying carpet with Aladdin, who was already armed with a sword.

‘I must warn you,’ Aladdin said, ‘I am not an expert in sparring.’

Sinbad drew his own sword. ‘That is not what I am expecting.’

They sparred, deflected, and dodged as they flew through the city’s streets and buildings. Sinbad kicked Aladdin in the stomach, causing him to fall back. Aladdin twisted the end of the carpet, causing it to jerk, nearly throwing Sinbad off balance. As he regained his footing, he saw Ali Baba riding behind them on his stallion.

The flying carpet crashed through a building’s window and passed through a crowded tavern. A drape caught on Sinbad’s leg, and Ali Baba saw an opportunity to climb up using the low-hanging fabric. His weight caused Sinbad to lose balance. Sinbad used his sword to keep Aladdin at bay as Ali Baba climbed up to attack him. Aladdin fell on the other end of the carpet when Ali Baba lunged at him, allowing Sinbad to pull back. But both the thieves of this realm continued to fight for the lamp as they neared the ocean shore.

It was then that Sinbad had an epiphany. With his free hand, he repeatedly slashed the carpet with his sword until it crashed to the ground, ending the chaotic chase.

All three of them fell to the ground and rolled over. Ali grabbed the lamp that was lying on the ground, followed by Sinbad, and then Aladdin.

They pushed and shoved each other while Ashrafiyah and Safeena arrived.

‘What is going on? Stop it!’ Safeena screamed. ‘Drop the lamp, leave it alone. You will end up rubbing it and—’

But it was too late. Although they dropped the lamp, they did end up creating enough friction on it, the lamp rose up mid air, glowing and shaking.

‘Okay, I didn’t sign up for this,’ Aladdin’s eyes widened.

And while no one was ready for it and before Sinbad knew it—everyone around the lamp was trapped in it.

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THIRTY-THREE

The world of Set was unlike anything Sinbad had ever seen in his entire existence.

It was red: the soil, the skies, the hills, and even the air seemed tinted.

The place was hostile, with storms raging and sand dunes as far as the eye could see. Sinbad had to escape, but first he needed to find the others. 'SINBAD!' Suddenly, he heard a familiar voice calling his name.

Sinbad turned and moved towards the noise, as the winds were rapping, and the clouds were bursting with electric current. He was in the midst of red heavy darkness, as he sprinted, but he couldn't find anyone.

'SINBAD!'

The voice echoed again.

Sinbad had to escape. He shouldn't have fallen into this trap. He shouldn't have become part of this world of Set. Whoever entered never escaped. That's what Safeena of this world had told him. Now he started feeling helpless; his heart was in his mouth and it felt like he was losing his mind.

'*Sinbad!*' The voice almost became a whisper.

Sinbad turned to look around, for the voice was now behind him. It was a familiar voice.

Master Reis?

There stood his old guide, mentor and one of the greatest seids to ever live on the face of the earth. Sinbad had learned everything from him.

‘How are you, kid?’ A smile appeared on his face. He was undeterred by the storms around him.

Sinbad went for his sword which was not there. ‘I must be dreaming. You are not real.’

‘I am as real as you want me to be,’ Master Reis said. ‘Did you miss me?’

‘Of course . . .’ Sinbad responded, confused and conflicted. ‘But you were a bad person.’

‘For not indulging in your childhood love story?’ He scoffed. ‘And whatever happened to that? How is that going?’ Master Reis asked.

Sinbad cursed under his breath.

‘She wants to kill you now,’ he continued.

‘She doesn’t know what she is doing,’ Sinbad defended.

‘She will never know,’ he corrected him. ‘You have failed me miserably, Sinbad. You have always been a failure. You are nothing but a joke, and you should have killed yourself the day I died because you have no identity without me. Look at you now. Have you forgotten all that you learnt? And don’t get me started on how stupid it was to come here. Whose idea was this? Have I not taught you enough about the god of chaos, Set?’

Sinbad nodded, feeling like a student again. ‘Yes, you did.’

‘And? What was it?’

‘He was a cruel uncle. As a ruler, he contested his nephew Horus’s claim. He also dismembered his brother, scattering his pieces across the world,’ he regurgitated.

‘That is what the New Kingdom preached. I taught you about the early dynastic history of Egypt as well. What was Set’s significance there?’ Master Reis asked, sternly.

Despite his efforts, Sinbad couldn’t remember much.

‘You are a failure,’ Master Reis spat. ‘Kill yourself.’

Sinbad flared his nostrils, but he couldn’t fight any longer and he fell on the sand, almost defeated. ‘Then kill me, if you feel so.’

‘Such an easy prey. Tsk, tsk, tsk.’

Master Reis’s body began to shape-shift into a jackal-headed man with a golden-armoured human body, carrying a staff as he circled around Sinbad.

‘You gave up too easily. I wanted to play along, mortal. Have fun,

joke around, play with my food before I eat.'

'Set,' Sinbad looked up.

'You are not from this world,' Set said smiling. 'Which makes me wonder, where are you from?'

'From a world where you are dead.' Sinbad said, grudgingly as he got to his feet and found himself with a sword again.

Ah! Indeed! He was trapped inside Set's world, so his sword could disappear whenever the god wanted.

'Interesting,' Set chuckled. 'I like your humour. At least it's a little dark. The other Sinbad who had come here, he was just pitifully boring.'

Sinbad sighed. 'Where are the others?'

'Oh, you'll find them, don't worry. Worry about yourself. How will you escape?' Set said playfully.

'I'll escape with everyone.'

'Of course you will,' he laughed. 'After all, it is quite easy to do so. People just don't ask for it here,' he said. 'Tell me, Sinbad, I never entered your world, then why did you enter mine?'

'It was a mistake. Just give my crew back and we will leave in peace.'

The half-jackal, half-man just shook his head. 'Unfortunately, that reason is not good enough. But I won't be too harsh. You can find your friends—if you are able to save them, of course. Follow the light and you'll find them.' Set chuckled. 'Rest assured, harbouring thoughts of escaping this place would be nothing more than wishful thinking.'

Set vanished. Sinbad began to look around for some light. He was clenching his teeth. Set was playing mind games, and as per the books he had read, they fit well with his character. He was a trickster of sorts.

'Oh, and one more thing,' a voice said.

An hourglass appeared in Sinbad's hand.

'You have time till the sand in the hourglass ends. And just for a quick pep talk, the last Sinbad who was here lost the challenge, my dear. He's one with the sand now.'

The bones that suddenly appeared below Sinbad's feet began to glimmer. Sinbad immediately pulled back, feeling horrible at that

sight.

And there was a cackle before Sinbad saw the light. He instantly made a move for it, realizing time was of the essence.

I have to find my friends. I need to save them. Where are they?

Sinbad began to think fast and move quick. He ventured towards the source of light, which fortuitously led him to the very spot where Ali Baba stood amidst the vast desert, encircled by a gleaming sea of gold. Ecstatic, he was jumping around, dancing frenetically in that gold, as if he didn't care that he was in an alternate realm which was controlled by an Egyptian god of chaos.

'Ali! Ali! It's Sinbad.'

Ali Baba looked at him suspiciously, immediately grabbed some of his gold and sneered at Sinbad. 'Stay away from me.'

'It's all right. It's fine. I'm not here—'

'Yes, yes. You are here to steal my gold. You are here to steal it from me,' he said.

'Dear man! You need to come back to your senses,' Sinbad replied, exhausted.

'No. I have all the gold in the world. I will not leave. This land, it is perfect.' he cried, holding the gold bars in his hand and hugging them tightly.

'It is not real.'

'It is. I know it is. I feel it. Look.' he showed the gold to Sinbad.

I have to make him realize and get him out of this trance!

It seemed like Ali had almost gone mad with the entire gold mania.

Sinbad said softly. 'There's a hill where's there's more gold. All the way to the east side. Would you come with me?'

Ali arched his brows. 'Erm, erm . . .'

'Come on, it'll be fun. You'll have more gold. And I'll . . . I'll get to travel.'

'Erm, erm . . . okay.' Ali grinned, holding few gold bars in his hand. He began to walk with Sinbad. 'I hope you are not lying.'

They began to walk further and further before Ali realized the gold bars in his hand had started to disappear.

'No! No! What is happening?' he screamed desperately. 'Where are they going? Why are they leaving me?'

‘They never existed in the first place,’ said Sinbad quietly.

‘Huh?’ he looked at him confused. ‘At least I’m going to a new place where there’s more right?’ he asked, looking hopeful.

Sinbad shook his head. ‘No.’

Ali was overcome with tears and rage as he grabbed Sinbad and shoved him down on the ground. But Ali was just an ordinary man compared to Sinbad, who was skilled in combat. He instantly toppled him on the ground and said, ‘This is what greed does. It’s never enough. And no amount of riches can ever satisfy any person.’

Ali was shocked for a moment, and then he came back to reality as he coughed. ‘What had happened to me?’

‘Great, you are back. Set had amplified your greed, which is your biggest vice. My theory is that he’s doing that with everyone. Come. Follow me. We need to rescue the others.’ Sinbad said, determined.

Sinbad and Ali, who was still slightly disillusioned, began to move faster towards another light that appeared. As they neared it, they found a young boy in front of a mansion made of sand. He was hugging an old lady.

‘Ammi, I bought it for you so that you can live like a queen.’

The old lady was sad and crying and hugged him on the side. ‘How much does it cost, my Aladdin?’

‘Everything,’ Aladdin smiled. ‘But I chose to steal everything for you,’ he joked. ‘After all, I don’t have time and I have to give you everything before you go away.’

They both smiled at each other. Sinbad realized that Aladdin stole things for his mother. He wanted her to have a good life.

‘Aladdin!’ Sinbad called him.

Aladdin turned to look in their direction, shocked. ‘What are you here for?’

‘I want you to come back. We need to return to our—’

Sinbad was interrupted by the appearance of several burly soldiers who grabbed hold of Aladdin’s mother and began dragging her away.

‘NO!’ Aladdin cried out in protest.

‘We are arresting her for stealing!’

‘NO! It was me,’ the boy cried, begging for mercy.

Aladdin pulled out his imaginary sword and began to fight the

soldiers, who fought back brutally.

'Enough!' said Sinbad, stepping in between Aladdin and the soldiers. He slapped Aladdin hard across the face, causing the mansion, the old woman, and the soldiers to disappear into sand and smoke.

The boy whimpered and cried.

'None of it is real, Aladdin,' said Sinbad, sadly. 'You cannot steal for someone else, even if it is for the right reasons. An honest life is far more important than a dishonest one,' Sinbad looked straight at Aladdin and continued, 'All this is not real, but this could be real, your mother could really be taken away like that. Let this be a lesson.'

Aladdin immediately snapped out of his trance. 'Oh God, I feel better. I was feeling so suffocated. It was just erm . . . what was that?'

'Let's leave. No time. We need to find Ashrafiyah and Safeena,' Sinbad said.

Aladdin narrowed his eyes. 'Who?'

'My friend and my alternate world's wife, all right? I need to save them so we can leave.'

'Do you even know how to leave this place?' Ali asked. 'The Lamp of Set doesn't allow anyone to escape. The last Sinbad failed.'

'Oh yeah,' Aladdin agreed.

'Just by agreeing with me, you are not redeemed,' Ali scolded. 'I'm still going to give you a piece of my mind once we're out of here.'

Sinbad listened to the constant bickering between Aladdin and Ali and almost regretted saving them. However, the shadow of Master Reis appeared in front of him, watching from the storms and mumbling the word 'failure' with a sly grin and a painful little twitch in his eyes.

'I wouldn't hesitate twice before killing you both,' Sinbad declared. 'We have our differences, that's true, but we also belong together. However, someone has planned this, so we might as well use our skills to find my friend and Safeena who is my wife in an alternative world.' Aladdin and Ali Baba were silent.

Aladdin almost protested, 'What are these alternate worlds you

keep talking about? But anyway, we will help you out. Anything to get out of this mess.'

Sinbad checked his hourglass and saw that half of the sand had already drained out. He led the way towards the other light, and amid a huge sandstorm, they stumbled upon large scarab beetles.

The insects had rock-hard shells with intricate patterns that made strange wheezing noises with their incisive mouths.

'Okay then,' Sinbad said, pulling out his blade and slashing at a few beetles. 'Set is holding us back so that we run out of time.'

'What do we do now?' Aladdin and Ali Baba asked in unison.

'We run,' Sinbad replied.

Dodging the beetles, they moved towards the light, with the beetles chasing them. One beetle flew at Aladdin and knocked him over. In Ali Baba's thick coat, he kicked and hit the beetle with his feet, protecting Aladdin from further harm. The other beetle attacked Ali Baba. However, Sinbad reacted swiftly, swinging his blade. His sharp weapon pierced and cut through the creature, causing a splash of blue liquid. Meanwhile, Aladdin used his small knife to cut across the chest of the beetle that had attacked him. The beetle emitted blue liquid on to his body, causing him to scream in horror. Sinbad and Ali Baba dragged him away from the beetle and pushed him towards the light.

'That's the most disgusting thing that has ever happened to me,' Aladdin shouted as they were sprinting for the light.

'*You* are the most disgusting thing I've ever seen in my life,' shouted back Ali Baba. 'I need my lamp.'

'Oh, have you forgotten we are *in* the lamp. If I had known, it had this whole bloody world—I wouldn't have touched it in the first place,' Aladdin growled under his breath.

By then they had reached the light, and Sinbad saw Ashrafiyah. He hoped to see her with someone, but she was alone. And she was shouting.

'IS THERE ANYONE? CAN ANYONE HEAR ME? CAN SOMEONE HEAR ME?'

Sinbad came up to her and began to shake her, but she couldn't feel or hear him properly. Her eyes were frantically searching for people, and it was clear that she couldn't see the three boys who

were standing right there.

'Ash! Ash!' Sinbad tried to shake her. 'Ashrafiyah! I'm here!'

She was still mumbling and muttering to herself. Sinbad felt frustrated and he tried to shake her by the cheek, but then he realized what it was.

'You are not alone,' Sinbad said. 'I understand the fear that comes with immortality, but remember that you have us, the crew, and me by your side. You've been running from loneliness, afraid of getting hurt while thinking others would fade away, but it's alright to release the past and embrace new experiences.' Sinbad referred to her dilemma about how she was afraid of letting go of her powers. 'Because of how you *feel*, you are lucky. You are lucky that at least you know who you want. And that's a power only a few possess.'

Ashrafiyah looked at him. She blinked. 'Sinbad?' Sinbad suddenly heard clapping from behind and raised his brows as he saw Ali Baba and Aladdin cheering with great pride.

'Never could I have imagined hearing wiser words than the words I just heard you speak tonight.'

'Indeed,' Ali Baba added. 'I don't like this thief, but I approve.'

'You were a thief too,' he said rolling his eyes.

'I was . . .' Ali Baba began to almost yell, when he stopped. 'All right, fine, I'm a thief.'

Sinbad and Ashrafiyah chuckled, and Ashrafiyah hugged him tightly.

They moved towards the last light, prepared to launch an attack if necessary, but as they neared it, they found the storms dissipated and the sands turned into a beautiful oasis. Sinbad saw Safeena sitting with another boy, only his back was visible. They were talking to each other near a large chestnut tree, and there was a pond where their feet were dipped into.

Safeena turned and saw the group. She told the boy that she'd just be back, and she walked over to Sinbad, grinning. 'You have come to rescue me?'

'Yes, let's go.' Sinbad could see there was a lot of self-awareness in the way she spoke.

'I'm fine here,' she smiled.

'What do you mean?'

‘Sinbad is here,’ she signaled at the boy who still didn’t turn. ‘I don’t need anyone else.’

‘It is a mirage, an illusion,’ Ashrafiyah added. ‘He made me feel lonely too. It’s all fake.’

‘Must be,’ Safeena smiled to herself. ‘And I may be crazy for saying this—but I’m happier living in a made-up world with him than live in reality without him.’

Sinbad felt his heart tug and almost froze for a moment. He could see that Safeena was happy. In that moment, the tinge of sadness was wiped off and he wanted to tell her—about his alternate self’s bones. That he had found them. Sinbad of this realm was dead, but . . .

‘Fine. Stay,’ Sinbad said.

Ashrafiyah turned around to look at Sinbad. ‘Are you mad? You are letting her die.’

‘No,’ he shook his head. ‘I’m letting her live.’

‘It’s all fake.’

‘I know.’

Safeena hugged both Sinbad and Ashrafiyah tightly, even though Ashrafiyah was still voicing her disagreement about leaving her behind. She then walked back to the pond, putting her feet in the cool waters and smiling at the boy. Sinbad was curious about his alternate version, but he decided to ignore it and said, ‘We need to leave.’

‘Now, how do we escape?’

He was back in the middle of the storms when he asked it.

‘That’s the tough part,’ Sinbad mused again.

‘Oh gods, if I had known . . .’ Aladdin cursed under his breath, ‘I should have not signed up for this when that bloody sorcerer told me to steal it from you. Oh wait, he had probably asked me to steal it from the other cave,’ he said, scratching his head.

‘What cave?’ Ali Baba asked.

‘It had a lamp too. One with a djinn who can grant wishes. That’s the lamp I had to steal.’ he shook his head. ‘And I stole this wretched one.’

Sinbad narrowed his gaze when he heard Aladdin mention the lamp and asked, ‘What did you just say?’

With only a few strands of sand left in the hourglass as time was almost up, Aladdin replied, ‘I stole this one?’

‘No, what did you say before that?’

‘That’s the lamp I had to steal?’ Aladdin replied.

‘Oh my dear and before that?’ Sinbad pushed.

‘A djinn who grants wishes,’ Aladdin answered.

Sinbad began to connect the dots, remembering his Early Dynastic studies in Egyptian classes.

Rest assured, escaping this place after that would be wishful thinking.

Sinbad remembered the words said by Set.

He was being coy.

Coy.

Sinbad smiled and yelled loudly. ‘I have figured out your puzzle. Now I know why you turned into Master Reis and told me about Early Dynastic studies. You have been giving me hints all this while.’

All the others were listening standing behind him, confused as to who Sinbad was talking to.

‘In your earlier form, during the reign of the Pharaohs, you were not just the god of chaos. That came about during the New Kingdom studies. You were actually the god of wishes.’ Sinbad grinned. ‘And anyone can escape this realm, but the problem is that no one thought of the answer on how to escape. It’s simple, you just have to ask for it. *Wish* for it,’ he paused. ‘So, I wish for my friends and I to get the hell out of here.’

For a moment, nothing happened and he was expecting Set to appear, but then the storms gradually subsided, forming a swirling vortex of sand around them.

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THIRTY-FOUR

They all returned.

Back on the streets where they were earlier fighting.

Sinbad and the others looked at each other before he lunged forward and grabbed the lamp from the floor. Ali Baba and Aladdin stretched themselves.

'That was morbidly simple.' Ashrafiyah commented. 'If it had been so simple all this time, why didn't anyone do it?'

'People look for complex solutions when simplicity can solve their problems,' Sinbad said, smiling.

'Thank you for saving me,' Ali Baba came in front, shaking his head. 'I was wrong when I said you wouldn't be able to do it and that you were a rascal of the highest order.'

Sinbad arched his brows. 'When did the latter half of that happen?'

'Oh, in my head,' Ali Baba said. 'But I am always indebted. Whatever you need.'

'Yeah, me too,' Aladdin awkwardly added from behind.

Sinbad laughed. 'Don't get yourself into trouble, boy.'

'Yeah, well, we still need to find the right lamp,' Aladdin sighed. 'I have a feeling that journey is not going to be easy.'

Sinbad smiled. 'It never is. But we still keep moving. That's the difference between those who triumph and those who don't. And you . . . ' he looked at Ali Baba, ' . . . stay clear of gold.'

'Absolutely, totally,' He looked at the lamp. 'I would like that lamp now.'

'And I would like to collect on your debt now,' Sinbad

said quickly.

'So early?' Ali Baba looked a little uncomfortable.

'Yes. I need the lamp. I need to figure out how I'm going to make it work on this, but I need it.' Sinbad said.

'Fine. At least I'm alive I guess,' Ali Baba grudgingly added.

Aladdin and Ali Baba both moved back, as Sinbad and Ashrafiyah waved goodbye. The sun was rising again, Sinbad was a tad bit sad to bid them goodbye—though they had fought and quarrelled and almost even died, it had been nice knowing them in this realm. He pressed the sphere to return back. Only to find himself on the floor.

Again.

Something was pressing on top of him, and he realized it was none other than the foot of a draugr—a large, red-coated, lava-spitting creature with strange hands and stranger feet, made entirely of parts of dead people. Sinbad cursed.

Why was there always something wrong every time he returned from a realm?

He could hear commotion and realized they had occupied his ship; his eyes focused to see the other crew members, including Ashrafiyah being bound and thrown on the deck.

Sinbad realized that the draugrs were the troops and not the *enemy*.

They were the enemies of the dark elves and demons. These beings had dark skin with tattoos all over their bodies, and large horns. They stared at him with anger in their eyes. Suddenly, Sinbad was grabbed by some draugrs, who tied his hands behind his back. He could hear their mocking laughs and scratching sounds. They pushed him forward, guiding him somewhere.

As he moved, Sinbad tried to figure out what was going on. He looked around and noticed that about twelve ships had surrounded his own, blocking his view. The ocean appeared darker, filled with terrifying creatures and strange horrors. They must have arrived while he was away with Ashrafiyah. Sinbad couldn't help but growl quietly in frustration as he saw his crew. They looked defeated and broken, their faces expressionless and devoid of hope. None of them met his gaze.

His plan had failed.

Sinbad was led by the dark soldiers, descending towards his own cabin. They pushed him inside, and to his surprise, he found Iblis sitting behind his desk. It was the same Iblis, with his frail body and a deceptive, warm smile on his face. Two women stood behind him —his mother and Safeena. Their faces looked cold and determined, and they stared directly at Sinbad, filled with various emotions. 'Hi, son,' Iblis said, 'Did you get it for me?'

Sinbad's hands were tied.

'Leave him be. Don't hurt his arms.' Iblis commanded.

The draugrs did as told.

'Sorry. It's protocol. They are dumb and mute creatures,' Iblis said, pursing his lips and being apologetic in his truest sense. 'How have you been? How was the journey? I've heard realm-hopping can be quite bothersome.'

Sinbad didn't respond.

'Ah, I see you are not chatty today. Maybe you're upset with me? Then I'll cut to the chase—you possess an item that interests me.' Iblis said.

Sinbad pulled it out from behind the lamp and held it in his hand.

'Give it.'

Sinbad had no choice but to do as he was told. He placed it on the table. By just requesting, Iblis had the power to make things move.

The devil picked up the lamp and studied it.

'Quite a lovely artefact isn't it? In the realm you came from, this defeated me,' he shook his head. 'What a puny way to die. I almost pity my alternate selves,' And then he handed the lamp over to Safeena, who grabbed it by the chest and put it in a bag, which Sinbad saw had the Sword of Beowulf too. 'I am sorry, I took the liberty to take the other item of interest from you.'

'So we were right,' Sinbad smiled, almost feeling that he had won a bit. 'You wanted us to find them.'

'Ah, yes.'

'Why?'

'Trophies, more like it.'

Sinbad arched his brows.

'You see, the realms that I got your seer to think of are those

realms where my variants lost.' He explained, standing up from the chair and moving closer to Sinbad. 'Those are the *only* realms where I've lost. Otherwise, in every other reality, I have won, in one form or another. The good part is, while scrounging for revenge and anger during my punishment days in Qlitop, I happened to see every reality and I was genuinely winning in every one of them except these three, which made me concerned about those three worlds. What would happen when I wouldn't exist there?'

'They seem pretty all right. Thriving even.'

'From where you look at it, which is quite myopic and mortal, yes. But I don't blame you. As an old creature of habit, I have to have foresight.' he shook his head. 'It's a curse, honestly. I envy you, son. I almost do. Regardless, I happen to figure out a way to take care of these realities too.'

Sinbad closed his eyes. The answer was there. 'Converging of the realms,' Heimdall had explained if the weapons are kept out of the realm for long—they will begin to get destroyed.

'Yes. Make it into one and then begin my wild hunt, so the three realms that had problems, which had no Iblis, were in one and I can easily make them better,' Iblis sighed.

'So now you plan to use these weapons and destroy them, and the worlds will come together?'

'Yes,' he said. 'But I don't want to destroy them. They are like trophies—to be hung on my wall, when all of this is over. I plan to look at these every day, laugh and mock my variants as to how they were unsuccessful and I wasn't. Why bother destroying such beautiful items? It's not every day you can possess artefacts that have destroyed you. Such power it would be to sit and watch them as I sip my tea. Did I tell you I love tea, son? One thing I love about mortals. They know how to make good tea. Delicious.' Iblis chuckled. 'The tricky part was Heimdall. Finding him would have been easy, but getting through him—oh that's tough. And if he would have caught me, he would have altered my brethren, so I couldn't just snatch the spheres from you either and enter the realms. The superior gods would have found out about this disturbance.' He signalled at the top where the Ma'laks were. 'They would have put up a fight and to be honest, I want to begin my

wild hunt with as little hassle as possible. I'm just done with the great war tropes. They are so cliché. So I sent you ahead, knowing Heimdall would trust you. But to trust you, he had to see nobility in you—thus, not letting you in on the plan. Otherwise, you wouldn't have been able to realm jump.'

Sinbad remained quiet and stoic. It all made sense. And it was scarier as he realized the three realms were horrific beyond understanding.

'But you had to find out,' Iblis shook his head. 'Your naiveté or stupidity and your team's gullibility was what was saving them. And now, we are in a fix. You know about my plan and thus I had to be here.'

'How do you know about what's going on here? Every time?' Sinbad asked.

Iblis arched his brows. 'Ah, I'll tell you how.' He gestured at the door.

A large, but familiar figure appeared.

It was a familiar face—Markus.

*

'No,' Sinbad whispered, staggering behind.

Markus was looking down, crying silently. He was bound too.

'Why would you do that?' Sinbad asked, feeling hollow inside.

'I was approached by him, actually,' smiled Iblis.

'No, no!' Markus cried. 'He visited me in my dreams.'

'I only come when I'm allowed.' Iblis corrected him. 'Cannot blame him. He was worried about his daughter. I promised him his daughter's safety, and in return he had to give me daily updates about the ship.'

Sinbad clenched his jaw. He blamed himself for it. He was the reason Markus took such a huge step.

'A deal with the devil.' Iblis said. 'It's the best thing ever! Now . . .' he clapped, excited. 'The last realm. Are you ready to go and get the poison for me?'

'Why would you think I'd do that after you told me everything?'

Iblis narrowed his eyes and laughed loudly as if it were a silly

question. ‘You surprise me, son. I will kill everyone on the crew and you’ll be left with no one to cry to when the new world is created. You have too much to lose.’

Sinbad felt his heart beat faster. ‘And what is the guarantee you won’t do it either way?’

‘A deal with the devil,’ Iblis raised his arm. ‘Get the poison for me and I’ll let them live. And you know I don’t back off on my deals. I can never. It’s the only thing that limits me from using my powers, to be honest.’

Sinbad looked down. At that moment, he saw Fatima’s eyes, she was watching him. For a moment he could swear he saw concern behind her steely eyes.

He shook the devil’s hand. ‘All right.’

‘Great,’ Iblis clapped his hands in enjoyment. ‘Let us begin then. I will send some of my men . . .’

‘No, I’ll go alone.’

‘No? You won’t need help?’ He raised his brows. ‘This realm you’re about to go to—I know about this one, and it isn’t as pretty as the other two. Believe me when I say this.’

‘I don’t care,’ Sinbad said. ‘I work alone.’

‘All right,’ Iblis said. ‘Off you go, my champion.’

Sinbad looked at the small shaped magical item and pressed it, glancing at Markus, who mouthed to him: ‘I AM SORRY.’

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THIRTY-FIVE

Sinbad found himself in the wasteland of snow and ice, and nothingness.

He was exhausted with all the travelling by now, but then who had said that saving the world would be a penny-full of wonders job?

Sinbad held himself tight around his shoulders, shielding himself from the biting cold as he searched for any kind of warmth—a cave or any place of warmth that he could find. He only saw the blizzard for miles and miles ahead.

His nose was red, and his cheeks were redder from the cold as he began walking, hoping to find something.

It was supposed to be in close proximity to the object.

But how does one find Poison of Asag in this dreadful cold? The last time he went to a cold area was during his search for the Tomb of Alexander. It was far more undesirable, so to speak, as the last one was where he had begun to realize the island he was on was a creature itself.

Here, Sinbad was in nothingness. The floors were icy, and the cold was dreadful.

His eyes fell on a small cave, though, which he happened to rush inside and hide himself from the iciness.

I should have been informed earlier that there would be snow here.

Sinbad's teeth chattered as his eyes adjusted to see, surprisingly, a fur coat. He grinned, feeling lucky, and he began to wear it, only to realize that it was wet. There were more clothes inside, and he narrowed his gaze, to find these clothes. They had blood on them.

He touched the drenched part of his coat as well, and it was scarlet in colour.

Realizing that whatever killed the previous owner of the coat might still be nearby, Sinbad pulled out his sword and readied himself for an attack.

Great. My luck isn't as good as I thought it would be.

As he began to move forward, he heard a low growl.

'Ehhh!'

As he looked behind, he noticed a person coming closer. It was clear that someone was hurt and in need of assistance. Sinbad hurried towards the rear of the cave and came across a horrifying scene. Dead bodies were arranged in a row, and amidst them, he discovered a man with a beard and a bald head. Despite his strong build and resilient demeanor, he was severely injured, as if he had been savagely attacked by the creature. He begged for help.

'He . . . help me.'

'Oh no!' Sinbad grabbed the man's arms and started dragging him out of the cave. The bearded man took the support of his saviour's shoulder as they moved forward.

'Where do you live?' Sinbad asked, looking behind to see if someone had followed them.

'Igloo . . . east . . .' he said.

Sinbad continued further east. 'How did you not die in that stink hole?'

'What?'

'How did you, oh never mind,' He grunted as he helped the man walk, staggering under this weight.

'Who . . . who . . .'

'What?'

'Who . . . who . . . who in the right mind, would come to a Yeti's cave?' the man asked, coughing.

Sinbad's blood ran cold when he realized something was following him. 'Yeti. You didn't say Yeti?'

The man didn't say anything more. He had passed out. Sinbad was familiar with yetis. They travelled in groups and had bodies resembling orangutans. The only distinction was their enormous size, with large heads, sharp teeth, and a primal nature

characteristic of their species.

‘All right, I believe the Yetis have figured out something is amiss. I strongly feel like we’re being followed. We need to act quickly!’ Sinbad muttered to himself while struggling to lift and pull the man. ‘You’re really heavy.’ He continued to move further east, his thoughts crowding him. All thinking about how to outsmart the most powerful creature in the world. Iblis was choosing to be indestructible, and Sinbad was at a loss for actions now. He could save his crew’s life—for now. After that, once the deal was complete, Iblis would kill them, first thing. He wouldn’t use them as bait anymore.

Sinbad’s muscles grew tired as he was getting close to the igloo when a large claw came out of nowhere and hit him in the face, tossing him away.

As the bearded man collapsed to the ground, Sinbad rose up, his face marked with a fresh scar, and a glinting sword gripped tightly in his hand. Suddenly, emerging from the swirling blizzard, a towering Yeti loomed before them. The creature was massive, with a powerful, ape-like body and a face twisted in rage. Its mouth opened wide, letting out a haunting, otherworldly howl that echoed through the icy landscape.

‘Sorry for taking your food away, buddy,’ Sinbad said. ‘But I have a knack for saving people. Care to tell me where I can find a particular poison?’

Yeti growled loudly and leaped at Sinbad, who momentarily froze before dodging the attack. The Yeti turned, gathering snow into a large ball, and hurled it at Sinbad. He rolled out of the way and began running in circles to evade the creature’s attacks. But the Yeti was smart and moved at Sinbad’s speed. Suddenly, the Yeti appeared and grabbed Sinbad, slamming him to the ground and ripping most of his clothes apart. Sinbad managed to summon enough strength to stab the creature from behind with his sword, which caused the Yeti to cry out before growling again.

Sinbad got to his feet and slammed into the Yeti with his shoulders, but was bounced back and left confused.

‘The head . . . the head . . .’ the bearded man from far called out to Sinbad, probably telling him what the creature’s weakness was.

Sinbad nodded and began to dash towards the Yeti, and the creature did as well, moving its hand with sudden speed.

As Sinbad skidded instead of jumping, he positioned himself between the Yeti's leg before turning and stabbing him from behind, jumping on his back and his shoulders. He then leaped on to the creature's back and shoulders, causing it to howl in pain as it tried to shake him off. Sinbad plunged his sword into the Yeti, causing it to howl again before collapsing to the ground.

Sinbad crawled in the snow, breathing hard. For a while, he just lay there in the cold, before pulling himself up and moving towards the bearded man.

'We are close to the igloo. Let's go.'

The bearded man was unconscious again. Sinbad tried to find something in his pockets to wake him up, probably a flask of water or something. 'Wake up. What's your name? Wake up!'

The bearded man opened his eyes, for a moment and squinted at Sinbad, 'You . . . you have a familiar face.'

Sinbad narrowed his eyes. 'What do you mean? Do you recognize me?'

The man nodded weakly.

'Umm . . . Yes, I think so.'

Sinbad leaned in closer. 'Where have we met before? Can you tell me?'

The man struggled to speak, and Sinbad gently tapped his cheek.

'Stay with me now. Don't pass out. I'll take you somewhere safe. What's your name?'

The man swallowed and managed to whisper, 'Sinbad.'

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THIRTY-SIX

Sinbad was in the igloo, along with Old Sinbad.

At least, that's how he characterized him.

Seeing his older self, much older but not any wiser, felt strange. Old Sinbad was lying in bed, bald and weak, coughing and wheezing. He was wrapped in a blanket while a fire burned in the room.

The elderly Sinbad watched as his younger self drank a bowl of hot soup made from the heart of an octopus. 'This tastes bad,' Sinbad said.

'You'll get used to the taste,' the man said, exhausted.

'I don't want to get used to it.'

'Always stubborn,' he chuckled and then coughed again.

Sinbad had told him about the entire story and how he had ended up coming here in the first place.

'I remember being stubborn, but life is too short for that,' Old Sinbad said. 'Thanks for saving my life.'

'Well, we have ourselves and no one else right?' Sinbad shrugged.

'True.' The old man shrugged too.

'Why are you here in the middle of the cold, being hunted by Yetis?' Sinbad asked. 'Didn't you win against Iblis? You must have been the hero of the day.'

Old Sinbad looked at Sinbad, with wrinkles underneath his eyes. He looked like he had aged quickly in his life. 'What makes you think being a hero is glamorous?'

Sinbad clenched his jaw. 'It isn't?'

'Oh no. My story isn't as perfect as the other variants of ours,' He

coughed again before reaching out to take the flask filled with dark liquid.

So he was a drunkard too. Weak. Almost lost in life.

'Though you shouldn't care for it. You want the Poison of Asag? Take it.' He held out his hand. 'And help Iblis out. God forbid, it's not worth winning against Iblis.'

Sinbad saw the man's stretched-out hand. He noticed the greenish hue of the skin, which he hadn't noticed earlier. 'You have poison in you?'

'Yes. My hand hurts. Take it. Slice it open and be done with me. I don't want to live any longer.' He sighed.

'What happened with you? What went wrong?'

'You don't need to know. You shouldn't care. With me, it will all be over. All I can tell you is how I found myself in the heart of the Yeti's cave. I went there, so it could kill me. But I was a coward. I can't bear to live like this any longer.'

'But you won.'

Old Sinbad pulled back his arm, and looked aimlessly at the top of the igloo—the ceiling of it. 'In the process of winning, what did I lose? Everything. Everything went away.'

'What?' Sinbad asked, confused.

'I was young. I was adventurous. I was full of hope and dreams. I wanted a better tomorrow. But I learned to defeat the devil, I had to find the Poison of Asag, which was trapped in the icy wastelands. I was able to get it. I was supposed to make Iblis drink that and he did. On one condition. I would drink with him too.'

'What happened then?' Sinbad stood up. 'What? And how did he agree so easily?'

'Deal with the devil. They never say no to a deal, but they always have a grave price.' He continued. 'So I did. I followed what he said. He did perish with the poison, but me? No. You see, Asag—that son of a gun's serpent—acts differently in mortals. It makes them temporarily mad. And knowing Iblis and his knowledge, he tricked me into going mad and killing everyone I loved. My crew. My Safeena . . .' he mumbled under his breath, in shock and in tears, remembering those days. 'When I woke up, I had blood around me. There were corpses of my people, my team, my friends.

I was drenched in their blood, regrets and guilt.'

Sinbad pursed his lips. 'You killed . . .' he whispered. 'So you distanced yourself and moved into the wilderness? As punishment? From what I understand . . . you were haunted by it for a long time before you went mad . . . out of loneliness. Is that why you killed them? Did you begin to resent them somewhere?'

'Yes. You really are another version of myself. You know me too well.'

'But it's not your fault,' Sinbad said, shaken.

'My fault is to think that Iblis was an idiot,' the old man said, rasping. 'I should have just let him live. At least, I had everyone then. Now? I have won the world, but no one to celebrate with.'

Sinbad remained quiet as the fire crackled in front of him. 'I don't think that's the reason you are here. I mean, yes, you did happen to go mad and did everything, but you didn't go into the Yeti's cave to get eaten alive. You went there to save the people he was eating. Somewhere, somehow, you wanted to save people. You always have. That never changes about us Sinbads. We always want to save others.'

Old Sinbad was quieter than usual. 'Be done with what you want and leave. This is not your fight. This is my life. Kill me. I'm already dying,' he said, indicating his wounds.

'I will, then,' Sinbad said with such gravity that Old Sinbad was almost taken aback by that statement.

'I was always afraid of being a failure. I was afraid of failing my friends, my Safeena, Reis, my mentor, who is long dead. But I realized that at least there's a difference between failing and rotting like a corpse . . .' he glanced at the Old Sinbad, 'and getting yourself up and doing something about those failures.'

Old Sinbad almost had a teary-eyed look.

Sinbad nodded as old Sinbad raised his arm. Sinbad used his sword to slice his arm a bit, cutting his veins, letting the blood drip from his arm into an old empty flask. Little by little, the blood filled the flask. Sinbad said, 'I will now kill you. Needless to say, it is a peculiar action to take, to harm oneself. But then you need to I guess.'

And he moved for his veins, as Old Sinbad started, 'I did go

searching for the Yeti. I did try to warn some people not to go that way. I thought I could stop them, but then . . . I simply . . . I simply lost hope in that cave. I didn't want to think about living anymore, and memories of Safeena kept coming back to me . . . they started to haunt me.' 'Thank you for telling me,' Sinbad brought the sky iron sword close to his skin. 'Any last words?'

'By fates and fortune,' Old Sinbad called the name of the ship and Sinbad grinned to himself.

Sinbad pressed the sphere, instead of pressing the iron to the skin.

And left the Old Sinbad alive. For one more day. To try again.

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THIRTY-NINE

Sinbad returned in one piece.

He found himself in the same room as before, facing the Devil and his followers, all of whom were grinning at him.

'That was quick.' Iblis said. 'You should go alone on adventures more often, son. I have a feeling you'll be more productive.'

Sinbad remained stoic and handed the flask to Iblis. He let Safeena keep it in her bag. Her eyes were cold and lifeless.

'Now, since we are done, it's just a matter of time,' he sighed, 'You know, I'm glad this is happening. We are in a much better position now. We can stay together as family in the new world order. You can be with your mother, with Safeena and I can be quite fun too.'

He glanced at his soldiers. 'Kill the crew now.'

Sinbad immediately came into a thunderous rage and paused. 'No, no. Just . . . erm . . . give me some time with them. I just want to say my last goodbye. Alone.'

'And plot against me again?' Iblis shook his head. 'Why bother even? Fine, have it your way. I shall give you some time. I have begun to admire human hopefulness even in the face of death. The world crumbles around you: there is plague, there are crimes and yet the humans don't give up. They can be quite sweet, right?'

Iblis and his soldiers left, with Fatima and Safeena following behind. The crew, who had been bound and gagged, were now free of their restraints and had been brought to the captain's lodge. Sinbad looked at the worried faces of his companions; he knew they had given up hope.

But he hadn't.

'I have beautiful memories with all of you,' he said.

'All of you taught me a lot. I don't know whether I taught you anything, but I've done my best to stand by your side.'

They all looked at him. Markus too. Sinbad didn't want to speak of his betrayal, for he was in the blind. He didn't want others to hate him right when they were about to die. After all, they had fought together as a team, and they would die as a team. So be it.

'Sinbad, I hope you have a plan,' Idris said.

Pressa nodded. 'Yes, brown boy, we are waiting for your out-of-this-world, stupid-ass plan.'

Markus pursed his lips. 'Anything for the brother.'

Sinbad glanced at Emir, Ashrafiyah and Husayn. Poor Husayn . . . Sinbad couldn't take out the image of him playing his oud in the tavern. Now he was about to get killed.

'Yes, I have a plan. And I don't know whether it'll work or not.' Sinbad said. 'That's why I'm not going to tell you what I'm going to do. But I need your help.'

'What is it you require?' Ashrafiyah asked.

'Get me inside Anansi's jar.'

'No.' Markus breathed. 'He will trick you again.'

'Probably. But I have to try,' Sinbad was calculating in his head what would happen and the possibilities of him going through hell and back.

'All right. Lie down. Be quick.'

Sinbad did so, as the jar of Anansi was kept on the side of the table. Markus used to carry it around his girdle.

Sinbad closed his eyes.

*

He opened his eyes and found himself in the spider world.

Earlier, the world of Anansi was a dreadful place for him, but not anymore. He has seen Iblis, and Sinbad realized that it didn't have to be ugly or grotesque to be morbid. Even a kind, older gentleman could be the problem. So the darkness didn't bother him.

Sinbad moved quickly through the dense forest of spiders, the

tufts of darkness that covered the skies, and the cobwebs that lined the entire woods.

He hurried towards the large spider who sat rather bored at the end of the forest.

The spider had the body of a tarantula and the upper half of a human, with two arms, dark skin, and red eyes. ‘Oh, you’re back,’ the God muttered, yawning. ‘I thought you’d never come.’

‘You made a deal with me,’ Sinbad reminded him.

‘Yes, I told you specifically that if you wanted the Tomb of Alexander, and didn’t release me, the love of your life would forget about you. Which, unfortunately, did happen.’ he shrugged. ‘So I would suggest you do the needful and help me escape this treacherous, horrible place.’

Sinbad arched his brows, remembering the myth of Anansi. ‘If I’m not wrong, you had a pot which held the world’s wisdom, right?’

‘Nom-nom, yes. Don’t talk about that.’ His voice went brittle all of a sudden, as if Sinbad had reminded him of a painful, but lovely past. ‘What do you know about nom nom?’

‘I know that you loved that pot of wisdom more than anything and unfortunately, it fell one day in the lake and the wisdom was distributed across the world, giving some wisdom to each individual on earth.’

‘Yeah. Still I feel that is less for most of them. Probably they lived in arid areas.’ He rolled his eyes. ‘But tell me. Why are you talking about nom nom?’

‘What if I tell you—I can give you the pot of wisdom again?’ he said quietly.

The spider shot a sharp look at him. ‘Funny. You are saying that you will bring forth the wisdom of this entire world and give it to me?’

‘Yes. But hear me out clearly. The pot will have wisdom. That I promise.’

‘Nom nom will be mine?’ his eyes shone.

‘The pot will have wisdom,’ Sinbad repeated his words carefully so that there’s no confusion.

Anansi narrowed his gaze. ‘All right. Any kind of wisdom is appreciated. And in return . . . you want . . .’

‘To pull back on the earlier deal. Give back the love of my life’s memory again.’

He sighed. ‘Oh, if only it was that easy.’

‘Come on, you know you can do it. You know you want that wisdom. Have you forgotten the sweet nectarine taste it had?’

‘It never tasted like nectar.’ He shook his head. ‘It tasted lovely nonetheless.’

Anansi scanned Sinbad, wondering if the bargain was true or not. ‘You do realize that if you don’t keep your promise, the love of your life will die a horrible death.’

‘Of course, I understand the circumstances. You will have the pot of wisdom, which I shall hand over to you. I have my ways.’ He paused. ‘And in the meantime, I can give you something as collateral.’

Anansi sat up, alert, looking at Sinbad, and they both stared at each other. Anansi crawled closer to Sinbad and slowly opened its mouth, whispering into the boy’s ear.

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FORTY

Sinbad returned to the room just as the doors bashed open.

'Time to leave!' shouted the creatures.

The rest of the crew pushed Sinbad as they were brought up on the deck. Iblis was waiting with the rest of his people. Sinbad saw that their ship, along with a dozen other ships that belonged to Iblis, had anchored close to a large archipelago with a half-broken hill and a cliff that opened up to the skies.

'Just so you understand, you'll see where we'll be riding from the top. See the green thing up there?' Iblis asked.

Sinbad looked up and saw the spectres on horses waiting at the cliff. 'I do.'

'That's us. Wait here till then.'

'You are not as nice as you think you are,' Sinbad said. 'Because in the end, you are not a general or a man on a mission. You are just a mad, crazy maniac who wants to kill so many people just because you can.'

Iblis clenched his jaw. 'Consider yourselves equivalent to rodents,' his voice turned venomous. 'You've scurried like rats into my house. Do you not think I will bring exterminators? And if I don't have them with me, then I'll become one myself. You have destroyed *my* world, and for that, you have been anything but nice to me. I have treated these rats the best way I could, but now I will do what is necessary.'

'Why are the rest of the gods agreeing to work with you? What have you promised them?'

'A slice of a new kingdom,' Iblis shrugged. 'A slice of the old

times when they used to be revered and not referred to in history books. That sense of power is often missed,' Iblis said, ordering Safeena to go with him. 'Come, daughter. We must go.'

Sinbad watched Safeena walk as she was told, while Fatima remained.

'Kill his crew,' Iblis ordered Fatima. 'And put some sense in your boy.'

Sinbad looked at his mother with pleading eyes.

Iblis dismounted the ship along with Safeena, and moved towards the cliffs. Sinbad and his crew were pushed to the ground. Fatima began to circle around the crew, toying with her favourite knives and blades, bringing them dangerously close to the necks of Ashrafiyah, Idris, and Husayn.

'Mother, you don't have to listen to him,' Sinbad pleaded.

'Of course I do,' Fatima said. She was a little bothered being addressed as 'mother'. 'You know why. You had to make it difficult. He's too powerful. He's the devil. You don't battle with the devil.'

'You don't. But you can trick him,' Sinbad cut her short. 'I have traded my soul to the god of spiders as collateral.'

Fatima arched her brows.

'We had a deal in which you agreed to save my soul and, in return, you protect him. My soul doesn't exist anymore in this realm. It is with the god Anansi . . . thus making your contract . . . null and void with the devil.'

Fatima swallowed a lump. There was hesitation. Sinbad saw the draugr approaching Ashrafiyah and pulling a knife next to her throat—ready to slice when . . .

Fatima instantly brought her red blade and seared through the flesh of the draugr. She began to throw her knives across the dark elves, which fluttered in the skies.

'Stop him.'

'Gladly.' Sinbad said.

Sinbad rushed to free his friends from the bonds as he grabbed the nearest sword, which he picked it up from his floor. By then, the other ships of Iblis had noticed the altercation and had begun to prepare for attack.

'Help my mother,' Sinbad instructed his team. 'I'll go and stop

Iblis.'

'How do you plan to do that?' Husayn asked, grabbing a knife.

'Improvise.' Sinbad grinned, saying the word he always used whenever there was something he had to do at the last moment.

Sinbad and his crew, along with his mother, continued their efforts to retake the ship from the others. Suddenly, the sky filled with chaos as other ships crashed, collided, and fiery projectiles streaked across the horizon, causing immense damage. Sinbad found himself unsure of what to do in that moment.

However, his confusion was interrupted by the appearance of a line of ships on the horizon. These ships were not targeting Sinbad and his crew but instead were aiming their Greek fire at the remaining enemy ships. Sinbad couldn't understand who was behind this unexpected aid until he peered through his spyglass that hung from his belt.

To his surprise, he saw the unmistakable flags of the Abbasid caliphate. Harun al-Rashid had come to their rescue. As explosions erupted, all the ships redirected their course towards the ships of Harun al-Rashid. 'YOU LEAVE NOW!' Pressa yelled with a knife as she jumped on an incoming demon, ready to plunge her blade.

Sinbad jumped off the ship and quickly rolled on to the ground, making his way towards the top of the cliff. As he ran, his eyes couldn't help but glance at the sky, which had transformed into a mesmerizing display resembling the colourful Northern Lights of Iceland. Shades of purple and green swirled together, creating a stunning but ominous sight.

With his life at stake, Sinbad sprinted towards the cliff where the riders were waiting. He reached the edge of the cliff and found a hiding spot just a few metres away.

From his vantage point, Sinbad observed Iblis, who had assumed his true form and joined the riders. Iblis was clad in battle armour, complete with a helmet adorned with horns. Alongside him stood Loki, also dressed in armour. Sinbad overheard Loki whisper, 'The horn of Gjallarhorn has been blown. We're running out of time. If the others come down, we won't be able to complete the ride.'

Iblis dismissed Loki with a gesture and turned in the direction where Sinbad was hiding behind a rock. Loki smirked at Sinbad,

treating him as an annoyance before departing.

Sinbad's body tensed, and he realized that something was amiss.

'I have a feeling . . . the contract is broken. That means . . .' Iblis said, 'I am allowed to kill you.'

A red pitchfork appeared in his hand, creating magic sparks before he threw it at Sinbad, who dodged it. Sinbad rushed forward and attacked him with his sky iron sword. The pitchfork and the sword sparred with each other.

'Enough games,' said Iblis as he thrashed into the sword continuously before it began to break apart. The Thokcha sword that he had been carrying all this while was now shattered and he was pushed down on the ground with the pitchfork centimetres above his head.

'You are one thorny kid!' he yelled.

And he brought the pitchfork to his chest, only for another blade to stop it.

Sinbad looked at the other blade and where it had come from, and he saw it was Fatima, who had arrived just in time.

'No longer shall I serve!' She growled and used her strength to toss the pitchfork away.

Iblis grunted and used his palm to levitate her towards him, clasp her throat and grab her tightly.

Iblis's face transformed into a frightening and distorted expression. His eyes turned a menacing shade of red, and his voice became filled with anger. 'I gave you everything,' he growled, his voice dripping with venomous rage. 'Power, safety for your son, and how do you repay me? By betraying me!' His once-human features contorted and his body morphed into a monstrous form, with rough, scaly skin and an enlarged size. 'Now,' he snarled, 'I'll take away everything you hold dear, just as you took everything away from me!'

Sinbad desperately tried to get up, but Iblis used his feet to stomp on his chest. With a chilling grip, Iblis raised Fatima by the throat and . . . twisted her neck.

Sinbad let out a piercing cry. 'NO!'

Fatima's lifeless body went limp and fell to the ground. Sinbad was released by Iblis, and he quickly scrambled to hold her, his

heart filled with anguish and grief. ‘Mother . . . Mother,’ he sobbed. ‘I couldn’t even get the chance to talk to you.’ He hugged her tightly.

Fatima was pale and cold by now, as Iblis laughed.

‘Now it is your time. To die.’ He said, calling Safeena out of thin air, as if he had teleported her from somewhere else. ‘But I’ll let my daughter take care of you. You are just a measly trouble for me. Also, this will serve you right. A great punishment.’

Sinbad’s eyes were red and brimming with tears. His face had turned red with the effort of holding back his emotions and trying not to break down.

‘I am going to defeat you.’

Iblis, now a monster, spat, ‘Don’t you understand? You can’t kill me. No one can. I’m indestructible.’

‘No, you are not.’ Sinbad said, looking at him in the eye.

‘What do you mean?’ Iblis said, looking confused.

Sinbad smiled. ‘I lied.’

‘What?’

‘The collateral that I gave my soul away—I lied. That’s another thing about humans, other than hope. We can occasionally put ourselves in a situation where we end up lying.’ Sinbad said. ‘My mother *thought* she was out of the contract because that is what I told her. That I had given up my soul. So she fought back against you, and you killed her. *You* broke the contract. The deal with the devil is flawed.’

‘Nonsense,’ Iblis said, unsure, as he suddenly felt his powers weakening, his body didn’t radiate as it had earlier, as the realization dawned.

‘You said you couldn’t be killed, but you can be “caught”.’

Iblis felt his powers slip away into oblivion as Sinbad said, ‘Also, Anansi took the offer without the collateral.’

Safeena, who had been standing behind Iblis, brought forth the blade she was carrying and stabbed him in the back, in the spine, as he fell to the ground.

‘You . . . you . . . my daughter . . .’

‘Screw you, old man.’ Safeena said.

As Iblis lay on the ground, he started to transform, and all the

demons vanished. The creatures scurried away as the Lord of the Dawn pursued them. Suddenly, the clouds parted, and a radiant light beamed down, causing the remaining members of the wild hunt to tremble in fear. But Sinbad's attention was solely focused on Safeena. And she returned his gaze. Gone was the coldness in her eyes.

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FORTY-ONE

A *few days later . . .*

Sinbad gazed at his mother's tomb on a bright day, grateful that things had improved since the difficult times. Memories of the days following the life-changing events flooded his mind.

The Ma'laks, led by Heimdall, had arrived and dealt with the remaining members of the Wild Hunt. Heimdall promised swift justice for their audacity. As for Iblis, Sinbad wasn't sure what had become of him, but breaking the contract seemed to erase his entire existence, as if he had been completely wiped away.

Heimdall also managed to recover the three items from Safeena and Sinbad, returning them to their rightful worlds. Harun-al-Rashid, though he had suffered losses, was able to defeat most of the creatures and bring an end to the conflicts. He returned triumphantly, reclaiming control over the guild. Harun showed that he was more than just a patron of arts and commerce in the city; he could also be a formidable leader.

His crew along with Safeena—they were with him, looking at the tomb in silence before moving down the slope of the hill towards their ship, Fate and Fortune, which was docked on an unnamed island.

'She was a good mother.' Sinbad said. 'I had a good mother. And I'm glad I fought beside her—you know, killing the devil and all.'

Everyone observed a moment of silence before they began to move down the slope of the hill and towards a small hut in an unnamed island, where the large ship of theirs stood.

Emir asked, 'So what now, lad?'

‘I don’t know,’ He said, as he held Safeena’s hand. ‘Safeena and I have a lot of catching up to do.’

‘You do.’ Idris smiled.

Husayn scratched his head, ‘Whatever happened to Anansi’s deal, by the way? Wouldn’t Safeena die a horrible death if you didn’t give him what he wants?’

Sinbad glanced at Markus and they both chuckled.

‘Oh no, I gave him what he wanted.’

*

Sinbad returned to the land of cobwebs and briskly moved through the forest with a pot in his hand.

As he reached the clearing where the hungry Anansi stood, his spider legs began to move excitedly. ‘As promised,’ Sinbad said, placing the pot on the ground, ‘I have brought you the wisdom.’

Anansi hopped excitedly and rushed towards the jar. He peered inside and discovered a paper tucked within. He pulled it out and unrolled it, revealing an illustration drawn by Markus.

And there, in the drawing, was none other than Sinbad. ‘What nonsense is this?’

‘Wisdom. Pot full of wisdom. You have the picture of a boy who has outsmarted the devil. That is being wise right there, and you have it in your hands.’

Anansi frowned as if it were just so anticlimactic. ‘You are lying, aren’t you?’

‘Oh no, I’m not,’ Sinbad grinned. ‘I delivered what I promised.’

‘But this is not . . .’

‘Tsk, tsk, tsk.’ Sinbad shook his head. ‘I don’t care about your perception, I did my job.’

And with that, he walked away.

*

‘You tricked the trickster?’ Husayn asked in surprise. ‘Great. Sounds about right.’

They all had a laugh.

‘Dear boy, I don’t think you plan to come with us. And I don’t

need to be a seer to see this.'

'Ah not right now,' He glanced at Safeena. 'We have to talk. Clear out a lot of air between us.'

'Exactly,' added Safeena. 'We have a lot of catching up to do.'

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Sinbad asked, 'Where do you all plan to go now?'

'A vacation sounds nice, with my daughter Mawu, before we are thrown into saving the world again.' suggested Markus.

'Yes. Let's go to a Greek island and rest.'

'What about following your respective journeys?' He looked at everyone, surprised at their answers.

The entire crew laughed sheepishly. 'Well, we have each other. Don't you say that all the time, darling,' Ashrafiyah said. 'I think it's nice to hang around more while we figure things out.'

Sinbad smiled as they made their way towards the ship, one last time, before embarking on their respective journeys.

*

Sinbad felt Safeena's head on his shoulder. He had no idea how he would survive on this island but he knew with Safeena by his side, he'd be able to do anything.

He marvelled at the coincidence that their first meeting had also taken place on an island, and now they had come full circle. Safeena broke the silence, asking, 'Do you think Iblis will come back?'

Sinbad pondered for a moment before responding, 'I don't think so. But evil can always arise, so we must be prepared to confront it whenever it emerges.' He looked at Safeena and continued, 'In most realms I've visited, we have always been together. In one way or another, we stuck by each other until the end. If there's ever a problem in this world or another that requires our help, I know we'll be there.' Safeena gently turned her face and kissed him on the lips. 'This was long overdue.'

Sinbad blushed. 'Good heavens, yes.'

The ocean remained calm, sparrows chirped, and the sun shone brightly above them. Safeena sighed, reflecting on their

adventurous lives. ‘We’ve come a long way, battling giants, birds, gods, and demons. What a life! I think we deserve some rest.’

Sinbad looked out at the sea and hugged Safeena tightly.

‘Absolutely,’ he whispered into her ear.

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THE BEGINNING

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